

Christine Cornea and Rhys Owain Thomas, eds, *Dramatising Disaster: Character, Event, Representation*. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013. 172pp. Hbk \$67.99

Cornea and Thomas' *Dramatising Disaster: Character, Event, Representation* examines depictions of disaster in visual media to provide a detailed critical treatment of the subject. Acknowledging the various connotations of 'disaster' in the introduction, the collection embraces the term's diverse implications and distinguishes itself from more focused studies of the topic. Offering as broad a definition of disaster as possible, Cornea and Thomas avoid becoming tied up in taxonomic debate. The introduction emphasises that the text looks 'not upon a specific disaster or a specific disaster context, but upon the wider topic of disaster [... and] is therefore able to offer a broad account of disaster across genre and media' (4-5). The collection's importance, therefore, lies in its ambition to draw scholarly attention to the way the media represents disaster, its figurative and metaphorical strategies and its historical and cultural contexts. Embracing a diversity of disaster narratives and the interdisciplinarity of media studies, *Dramatising Disaster* is a significant contribution to the field. As with any collected volume, the analytical methodologies are varied, the critical contexts distinct and the approaches to the genre can in places, seem disconnected. However, the text is well organised and the editors have taken care to contextualise the content, providing a short introduction to each of the main sections in addition to the volume's overall introduction.

The book's scope is reflected in its structure. Organised into three parts it engages with 'disaster' in increasingly broad terms. 'Part I: Personal Identity, Trauma and Disaster' examines personalised disaster in film and television. 'Part II: Representing the Aftermath: New York and New Orleans' considers evocations of urban disaster and the way the two cities have been portrayed in film, video games, comics and television. 'Part III: End Times: The Politics of Disaster' engages with depictions of global cataclysm. Here film, television and

pseudo-documentary are discussed in relation to contemporary anxieties. The volume's increasingly broad trajectory, which moves from personalised renderings of disaster to more extensive globalised depictions, means that it simultaneously moves towards (structurally) and beyond (conceptually) traditional notions of secular eschatology.

The contributions contained within Part I of *Dramatising Disaster* approach the subject matter in distinct ways. The opening essay, 'Diagnosis Disaster', takes as its focus the impact of cancer on the lives of women and their families in *Stepmom* (Chris Columbus, 1998) and *The Family Stone* (Tom Bezucha, 2005). Interrogating gender representations, Liz Powell argues that in these films cancer is the catalyst for masculine heroics and feminine suffering and sacrifice. The chapter offers the most personalised analysis of disaster in the book and for some readers may stretch their understanding of what a 'disaster narrative' encompasses. Indeed, possibly reflecting a little insecurity about the diverse manner in which the term is being applied, the introduction to Part I reminds readers that 'disaster' can affect an individual or a whole society (8). Reinforcing this point, Powell offers engaging, informative and insightful analysis to argue convincingly that cancer is often constructed as cultural disaster.

Chapter Two, Rob Bullard's 'Trauma and Technological Accident in Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter*', offers astute analysis to present the case for a connection between technology and trauma in Egoyan's film. Linking trauma theory and visual culture, Bullard presents a sparkling reading of the film that shows how an accident can exist as disaster for both individual and community. Using Žižek's ideas on the effects of trauma and its capacity to render the society 'retroactively edenic' (28) the chapter grapples with the temporal effects of the technological disaster and the paradox that technology is both life-enhancing and destructive. Eloquent and poignantly argued, the essay's success lies in uniting paratexts and close filmic analysis with Žižek's work in a way that is both innovative and revealing.

In “High School is a Battlefield for your Heart”, the final chapter of the volume’s first section, Hanna Ellison takes a rather left-field approach to the subject. She argues that the centrality and success of disaster narratives on teen-branded ‘netlets’ derives from the fact that they deal with similar themes to teen television dramas. Both genres, she argues, are about a loss of control and a fight for agency. Accordingly, she offers a sophisticated discussion of the thematic tropes of disaster narratives and their potential as metaphors for maturation. Although the appeal of disaster fiction for young adults is readily acknowledged, and specific disaster based television shows are often the subject of scholarly analysis, the chapter nevertheless offers new insights into both the teen appeal of disaster works and the production contexts from which they emerge.

Ruth Mackay and Stephen Mitchell’s ‘Re-constructing “LeCoup”: *Man on Wire*, Derrida’s Event, and Cinematic Representation’ opens the volume’s second section with the first essay to focus exclusively on New York. It draws upon Derrida’s work on the event, singularity and re-expression to explore the ‘paradoxical iterability’ (65) of a unique event. Suggesting that *Man on Wire*’s (James Marsh, 2008) Twin Towers setting calls to mind the events of 9/11, it investigates how singular happenings can be evoked through filmic repetition. The essay is both thought provoking and conceptually interesting. However, its relationship to the collection’s focus on ‘dramatising disaster’ is tenuous. While the piece is expertly written and offers a fascinating and unique analysis of temporality and place in cinema, its central focus is “LeCoup” and it is only the Twin Towers setting that links it to disaster. Of course, while this location is inextricably associated with the events of 9/11 and the authors are careful to point out that we have two singular events repeated in media imagery, the link does nevertheless, seemed tangential at times. Yet the chapter’s analysis is both worthy and useful to disaster scholars, despite seeming a little out of place in this volume. It draws attention to disasters as singular events and, like Bullard’s article, underscores the temporality of the experience of disaster.

Chapter Five, 'Catastrophic Beauty', maintains the text's attention on New York yet offers a more conventional discussion of disaster and location. Examining destruction as immersive experience, Sophie Halliday provides an excellent summary of the critical context of game analysis before discussing how works like *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (2011) and *Crysis 2* (2011) express contemporary fears of insecurity, invasion and disaster following the events of 9/11. Arguing that the exaggerated emphasis on defence in these games is a response to insecurity in contemporary urban spaces, her work adds to the growing narratological/ludological discourse around gameplay, immersion and verisimilitude.

In Chapters Six and Seven, the collection's focus shifts to New Orleans in the wake of hurricane Katrina. Nina Mickwitz's '*After the Deluge*' offers an insightful discussion of the eponymous multi-media web-comic as a 'documentary of social concern' (87). Breaking down notions of the supposed 'authenticity' of documentary, Mickwitz argues for the comic as a more honest representational form that circumvents the objectification of individuals affected by disaster. Explaining that the comic form exists as a counterpoint to the (often sensationalist) media coverage of disaster, while still offering a witness to those events, her essay is one of the most overtly political in the collection. Critical of media sensationalism and the privileged position of documentary, her work invites the reader to re-evaluate the distinctions between fact and fiction in relation to the experience of disaster.

Although his essay is less overtly political, Ed Clough's 'Duelling and Jamming' also examines responses to hurricane Katrina. He outlines how HBO's *Treme* (2010-2012) represents its characters as inhabiting a culture of resistance. He explains how they reclaim power in Katrina's wake through 'jamming' (covert, communal resistance) and 'duelling' (overt, individual resistance). Accordingly, his contribution, like the one preceding it, is more concerned with the impact and

aftermath of disaster than with the event itself. The chapter is one of the most engaging in the volume and offers a sophisticated reading of *Treme*, spectatorship and the varied responses to disaster within community.

Moving away from sites of real disaster, Part III opens with Peter Kramer's re-examination of *Dr. Strangelove* (Stanley Kubrick, 1964). Although somewhat anomalous in a collection that deals largely with works from the mid-1990s to the present, Kramer's essay attempts to reinvigorate the critical reception of the film. Beginning with an outline of the established cultural and critical status of *Dr. Strangelove* before drawing upon extensive archival research, Kramer assesses the film in relation to its cultural context and the adaptation process. He offers a new reading of the film that highlights its equation of American nuclear strategy with Nazi politics. In so doing, he invites the reader to re-evaluate one of the most critically acclaimed disaster films in cinema history.

In a well argued and perceptive reading of *Torchwood: Miracle Day* (2011), Rhys Owain Thomas interprets the series as a queering of ideas around both sexuality and disaster. He explains how the show's overt attempts to subvert the traditional binaries associated with sexuality are extended to a 'queering' of life and death's antithetical relationship. Utilising the usual tropes of disaster, he argues that the series inverts traditional notions of the desirability of life over death through Captain Jack's (John Barrowman) character and the premise of *Miracle Day*. However, despite its attempts to complicate binaries, Thomas successfully reveals that the series is highly dependent on them. In a refreshingly frank analysis he highlights that rather than challenging conventional categories, *Miracle Day* ultimately reaffirms what it sets out to undermine.

The final essay, Cornea's 'Post-Apocalyptic Narrative and Environmental Documentary' examines The History Channel's speculative *Life After People* (2008). In an effort to move the critical discourse surrounding disaster on from the work of Susan Sontag and Mick Broderick, Cornea selects a production that

eschews the spectacle of disaster and the drama of human survival. *Life After People* focuses on the disintegration of human artefacts following the disappearance or extinction of *homo sapiens*. The documentary revels in the *mise-en-scène* of urban decay to show humanity's negative effects on the planet. Because of this, Cornea argues, *Life After People* was received as belonging to environmental discourse. However, she explains, 'the programme's formal construction, along with its excessive use of certain visual devices, seems to indicate that it is less about the future of the planet and more about the future of television' (162) and the rebranding of The History Channel as HISTORY in 2009. Thus, the environmental implications of the show are revealed to be only one facet of a more complex text that emerges from the context of contemporary economics, the banking crisis and the digital switchover.

Collectively, *Dramatising Disaster* is a detailed critical treatment of a wide range of works dealing, sometimes indirectly, with disaster. There is not a weak essay in the volume and it provides consistently innovative analyses that reach beyond conventional assumptions. It is not heavily theoretical, yet where the ideas of thinkers like Žižek and Derrida are utilised, the arguments are clear, insightful and accessible to both scholars and students alike.

Structurally pleasing, the wide-ranging applications of the term 'disaster' in the early chapters are transformed in the concluding sections, which seem to look both outwards and forwards in their criticism of global and future history. Hence, this is a work that advances the discipline by opening it out, rather than unifying it. Potted histories of disaster-based criticism appear throughout the chapters, but this is not a work one would refer to if seeking a comprehensive history of disaster criticism. Rather, the text is clear in its aims: to expand the scope of disaster studies (2), and it is highly successful in doing so. Overall, *Dramatising Disaster* is an important work that demonstrates the centrality of 'disaster' across all media productions. It provides consistently high quality research and is a valuable contribution to this growing area of study.