



From the Lisbon earthquake to hurricane Katrina: catastrophes, science and popular culture

W. Krauss

University of Texas at Austin, Dept of Germanic Studies, USA (werner.krauss@gmail.com)

Two hundred years ago, the Lisbon earthquake and the subsequent tsunami became one of the first global media events. This catastrophe became a major intellectual challenge in the Age of Enlightenment. How were these signs to be interpreted? Was this the work of an angry God or of an uncontrollable Nature? Scientists in various disciplines tried to understand what had happened, and the same was true of philosophers and writers. One of the most moving interpretations of this calamity is Heinrich von Kleist's novella 'The Earthquake in Chile'. In this story, two illegitimate lovers are saved from execution by the earthquake. In the end they find themselves happily reunited with their newborn baby in a church thanking the Lord. But the priest asserts that their sinfulness had provoked the rage of God, and the churchgoers turn into a lynch mob. Only the baby survives in the arms of an enlightened citizen. This citizen stands in lonely isolation for a future society in which reason and rationality will prevail. This, at least, is what Kleist seems to have been hoping for. My presentation interprets recent events such as the Elbe River flood in 2002 and hurricane Katrina in 2005 through the lens of Kleist's novella and other enlightened discourses following the Lisbon earthquake. How do such cataclysmic events present themselves today? What happened to Enlightenment thinking, and where is the science of calamity to be found among human pain and loss, among risk management and unbelievable occurrences? Which roles do science and rationality play in the interpretation and management of these extreme events? Have we gotten any closer to the utopia of an enlightened world? Using a comparative perspective, I will show that catastrophes unfold on various levels, and that they do so according to cultural patterns. Unknown deeds of sacrifice and rescue are still a part of every such catastrophe, along with the looting and the terror. On another level, risk management demonstrates a national dimension that can be confirmed or even created by these efforts at recovery from disaster. Finally, I will focus in particular on climate change as a framework for interpreting these events. In doing so I will highlight the blurring of the boundary between rationality and religion, and I will analyze the consequences for both natural science and the societies Nature has put at risk.