



Appropriating disasters. A framework for cultural historical research on catastrophes in Europe, 1500–1900

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that ‘appropriation’ is key to understanding how communities respond to disasters, and offers a new methodological approach. It suggests that cultural representations of disasters should be studied through the prism of appropriation. Both in the past and the present, people have crafted specific representations of disasters and used them as identity markers to create a sense of community. Appropriation involves attaching meaning to the disaster in order to make it comprehensible or even acceptable. This meaning was attached in two ways: through representation and identification. Representation is the substitution of a disastrous event with a cultural artefact, like an image or text, that corresponds to the event. Identification is the process by which people constantly relate themselves to other individuals and groups in terms of similarity and difference. To understand these processes, cultural historians should look at producers and consumers (who produced meaning in their turn) as well as the medium, genre, and discourses they can find in disaster representations.

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Introduction

Nowadays, we are constantly confronted with frantic reports on natural calamities. Major news outlets describe the potentially cataclysmic effects of the latest forest fires, floods, and storms – and due to the ongoing climate crisis, extreme weather events can be expected to have ever greater impacts on our lives. If we are left wondering how we should deal with these disasters, we should also acknowledge that natural calamities have always occurred and have affected human experience in myriad ways.

This article focusses on cultural representations of disasters. For many centuries, news about catastrophic events has been disseminated via media such as pamphlets, chronicles, poems, and prints. Via these media, catastrophes were ‘appropriated’ and we argue that this is key to understanding how communities respond to disasters. Both in the past and the present, people have crafted representations of disasters and used them as identity markers to define communities. Firstly, we will discuss how our approach is grounded in the existing historiographical trends in the field of historical disaster studies. Our method profits from an inductive

approach to disasters, as we will show in the second part of this article. In the third section, we outline a theoretical framework of appropriation, focusing on the concepts of representation and identification. The fourth part, ultimately, provides a methodological outline to study the ways in which writers and artists have actively appropriated disasters. We suggest a set of questions historians should pose when analysing their source material to get at the heart of the ways in which past communities took shape in the wake of disasters.

Based on our empirical research, mainly derived from the Northwest European and in particular the Dutch context, this article offers a methodological framework for cultural historical research of catastrophes. While we believe that the methodological outline we propose has value for studying cultural media in non-European cultures in other eras as well, we also acknowledge that the insights we produce particularly apply to Northwest European societies, especially from the moment that the printing press was introduced in the fifteenth century until the rise of mass media in the nineteenth century.

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Historiographical trends

In the last fifteen years historical disaster studies has developed into a flourishing area of research.¹ Complementing the highly interdisciplinary field of disaster studies, historians have raised awareness that historical knowledge adds to our understanding of the impact of shocks and hazards on societies. It also provides insights into the coping mechanisms people develop in response to those events.

Generally speaking, one can distinguish three different, partly overlapping, thematic fields: social/institutional, environmental, and cultural. To this day, historians trained in social and economic history have been important contributors in this rather young but booming field of historical disaster studies. Focusing predominantly on the vulnerability and resilience of past societies and drawing on concepts from anthropology and sociology, they have mostly been interested in the impact of disasters on the social systems and mentalities of these communities. The compilation of large sets of data enables them to classify the material impact of disasters and to map how societies distributed resources after disasters. In this way, history is used as a so called 'laboratory', as Bas van Bavel and Daniel Curtis have called it. They analyse what made some communities more vulnerable or resilient than others and determine which social, political, and economic infrastructures these communities have developed and refined in order to mitigate the consequences of recurring disasters.² Part of their endeavour is also to grasp how communities give meaning to these disasters. Building upon the insights from micro history and the history of mentalities, social historians have investigated the ways in which contemporaries wrote, thought and argued about disasters and, thus, developed mental frameworks to come to terms with them.³

Environmental historians have also added significantly to the study of disasters in a historical frame. They offer long-term studies of the interaction between humans and the environment in the broadest sense by dealing with such topics as the vulnerability of past societies to climatic variation, water management and engineering, and technological and institutional responses to hazards and risks.⁴ Historical climatology has in particular attracted new attention, including from wider groups of historians, as shifts in the global climate system are increasingly seen as instigators of major societal changes.⁵

¹ See for instance: G.J. Schenk, Historical Disaster Research: State of Research, Concepts, Methods and Case Studies, *Historical Social Research* 32 (2007) 12–14; M. Juneja and F. Mauelshagen, Disasters and Pre-Industrial Societies: Historiographic Trends and Comparative Perspectives, *The Medieval History Journal* 10 (2007) 4–10.

² B. van Bavel and D.R. Curtis, Better understanding disasters by better using history: systematically using the historical record as one way to advance research into disasters, *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 34 (2016) 1–32; B. van Bavel, D.R. Curtis, J. Dijkman, M. Hannaford, M. de Keyzer, E. van Onacker and T. Soens, *Disasters and History. The Vulnerability and Resilience of Past Societies*, Cambridge, 2020.

³ See for instance A. Oliver-Smith and S.M. Hoffman (Eds), *The Angry Earth. Disaster in Anthropological Perspective*, London, 1999; G. Bankoff, *Cultures of disaster: Society and natural hazards in the Philippines*, London/New York, 2003.

⁴ P.J.E.M. van Dam and S. Wybren Versteegen, Environmental History: Object of Study and Methodology, in: J.J. Boersema and L. Reijnders, *Principles of Environmental Sciences*, New York, 2009, 25–31; C. Pfister, The Vulnerability of Past Societies to Climatic Variation: A New Focus for Historical Climatology in the 21st Century, *Climatic Change* 100 (2010) 25–31; A. Sundberg, *Natural Disaster at the Closing of the Dutch Golden Age. Floods, Worms and Cattle Plague*, Cambridge, 2022.; C. Rohr, Perceiving, managing and commemorating floods in medieval central Europe, in: C.M. Gerrard, P. Forlin, and P.J. Brown (Eds), *Waiting for the End of the World? New Perspectives on Natural Disasters in Medieval Europe*, New York, 2020, 201–217.

⁵ Van Bavel et al., *Disasters and History*, 13; D. Degroot, K. Anchukaitis, M. Bauch et al., Towards a rigorous understanding of societal responses to climate change, *Nature* 591 (2021), 539–550.

In recent years, historians have come to embrace a more cultural perspective on disasters. 'Culture' can have different meanings, such as the customs and social behaviour of a particular people or society, but here we understand culture as forms of 'representation', referring to the manifold human-made visual artefacts and texts being produced in the aftermaths of disasters.⁶ The underlying premise is that these cultural products, spread through a wide variety of media, are key to understanding the societal impact of disasters. Historians study the various types of media, such as chronicles, printed news, printed images, songs, and paintings, that past communities have used to disseminate the news about disasters, harness emotional coping with catastrophic events, anchor the lessons they learned in collective memory and, thus, boost societal resilience.⁷

Yet, we believe the motives contemporaries had for creating these writings and artefacts were as various as their manifestations. Cultural representations of disasters did more than psychologically process past disasters and prepare a community for future ones. One of the key functions of these media, which deserves more attention, is community building.⁸ The sociologist Samuel Henry Prince argued that life becomes like 'molten metal' in times of catastrophe: what was once fixed and intangible becomes flexible and open to change.⁹ We argue that this applies to communal bonds as well. People incorporated the disasters they experienced into larger stories, and used these to shape collective identities and legitimise practices of inclusion as well as exclusion.

Defining disasters: an inductive approach

The anthropologist Anthony Oliver-Smith reminds us that disciplines may define disasters in very different ways.¹⁰ Since the growth in disaster studies began in the early 1950s, social scientists have made efforts to propose an 'objective' definition of disaster.¹¹ They argued that an event can be deemed a 'disaster' when it meets a predetermined set of qualities, such as a specific number of casualties or a specific amount of material damage. Since then, many different typologies and classifications of disasters have been developed in search of a common paradigm in disaster studies.

This quantitative and taxonomic approach is less applicable in the context of cultural history, for two reasons. Firstly, many of the data required are not available for disasters in the more distant past. In many cases, historians can at best roughly estimate property damage and casualty numbers. Using quantitative benchmarks will therefore not always work accurately in historical research on

⁶ C. Mauch, and C. Pfister (Eds), *Natural disasters, cultural responses: case studies toward a global environmental history*, Lanham/Boulder/New York/Toronto/Plymouth, 2009; F. Krüger, G. Bankoff, T. Cannon, B. Orłowski, and E.L.F. Schipper (Eds), *Cultures and Disasters: Understanding Cultural Framings in Disaster Risk Reduction*, New York, 2015; M. Juneja and G.J. Schenk (Eds), *Disaster as Image. Iconographies and Media Strategies across Europe and Asia*, Regensburg, 2014; J. Spinks and C. Zika (Eds), *Disaster, Death and the Emotions in the Shadow of the Apocalypse, 1400–1700*, London, 2016.

⁷ See for example, T.E.D. Braun, and J.B. Radner (Eds), *The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755: Representations and Reactions SVEC 2005: 2*, Oxford, 2005.

⁸ This is also the main thesis in the research project 'Dealing with disasters in the Netherlands: the shaping of local and national identities, 1421–1890' (www.dealingwithdisasters.nl). For an outline, see L. Jensen, Floods as shapers of Dutch cultural identity: media, theories and practices, *Water History* 13 (2021) 217–233.

⁹ S.H. Prince, *Catastrophe and Social Change: Based upon a Sociological Study of the Halifax Disaster*, New York, 1920, 19.

¹⁰ A. Oliver-Smith, What is a Disaster? Anthropological perspectives on a persistent question, in: A. Oliver Smith and S.M. Hoffman (Eds), *The Angry Earth. Disaster in Anthropological Perspective*, London, 1999, 18–34.

¹¹ For an overview, see: R.W. Perry, What is a disaster?, in: H. Rodriguez, E.L. Quarantelli, and R.R. Dynes (Eds), *Handbook of disaster research*, New York, 2007, 1–15.

disasters. Secondly and more importantly, numbers do not necessarily govern the ways in which people experience, process, and give meaning to disastrous events. Other factors play a role as well, such as unexpectedness, the number of consecutive disasters, and the presence or absence of an acceptable explanation.¹² Cultural frameworks and symbolic connotations are at least as important in the collective experience of a catastrophe.¹³ The burning down of a cathedral, for instance, did (and does) have enormous symbolic meaning and cultural impact, even when the number of human casualties is low or even zero.

When defining what disasters are, scholars should therefore take into account how contemporaries themselves defined the events instead of adopting a definition derived from present-day experiences. This can be done by using the approaches put forward by the so-called *Begriffsgeschichte* – studying the changing meanings and connotations of concepts through time – as various historians of disaster have already demonstrated. This approach revolves around mapping the etymology of words such as ‘disaster’, ‘crisis’, and ‘catastrophe’, and by studying changing narratives and lexical choices with regard to semantically related fields, such as ‘damage’, ‘loss’, and ‘vulnerability’.¹⁴ This history of concepts provides historians with valuable insights into the mental frameworks of people trying to make sense of disastrous events.¹⁵

However, a note of caution is in order. Although people sometimes used terms like ‘catastrophe’ (English and French), ‘disastro’ (Italian) and ‘ramp’ or ‘plaag’ (Dutch), they often discussed and represented floods, epidemics, and urban fires as horrific events *without* using these precise words. The focus on specific terms can thus result in blind spots. Furthermore, the variable ways in which contemporaries used terms in, for example, chronicles, diaries, and pamphlets do not always correspond with the less pliable definitions given in dictionaries and scientific treatises.

To counter these pitfalls, it may be useful to apply an ‘inductive’ approach that acknowledges which events contemporaries deemed a disaster. This approach does not begin with prefiguring certain conditions, but instead departs from the source material. It entails looking for the ways in which contemporaries represented specific events as disasters and, through this process of signification, came up with their own often implicit definitions.¹⁶ We need to be

sensitive to the ways in which contemporaries described events, linked them to each other and gave meaning to them. Sometimes, this means that diverse and seemingly unrelated events such as war, floods, stranded whales, blood rains, and comets were grouped together.¹⁷

As Oliver-Smith already pointed out, Ludwig Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘family resemblances’ offers a useful way of explaining how contemporaries stretched the concept of disaster to include a range of very different phenomena.¹⁸ Just as nieces and nephews are not exact copies of each other, they nonetheless are connected because they share some elements of their DNA in various, overlapping combinations. Similarly, war, famine, visions in the sky, and rare natural occurrences (such as whales washed ashore) all fitted within the concept of disaster because they shared something in the eyes of contemporaries. What they had in common, however, differed according to time, place, social context, and more. This explains why modern-day atheists would not think of a comet as a catastrophe, while medieval and early modern Christians indeed would do so. The latter group’s point of reference was the notion of providence, driving them to lump diverse phenomena together and regard them as divine messages that something worse was about to happen.

In short, our working method comes down to not defining the concept of a ‘disaster’ beforehand but studying the source material to induce how contemporaries grouped events, and how these were perceived from a societal perspective. For the Dutch context, the historian Ruben Ros, for instance, showed by computational analysis how the concept of ‘nationale ramp’ (national disaster) made its appearance in Dutch newspapers and periodicals in the early nineteenth century, marking a rich variety of events. The emergence of this concept was rooted in changes in the meaning and use of the notion of ‘ramp’ during the second half of the eighteenth century, and became strongly politicised in the course of the nineteenth century. The changing connotations went hand in hand with a different way of dealing with disasters. Contemporaries increasingly framed disasters as national political events, and developed new ways of evoking empathy with the victims, forging national bonds, and organising fundraising.¹⁹

The cultural appropriation of disasters

The inductive approach brings up the issue of appropriation: words and images can be used in different ways and with different aims. We believe that appropriation is key to understanding the cultural responses to disasters. To substantiate this, we will first outline the concept of appropriation and then zoom in on the concepts of representation and identification. In our opinion, these two practices lie at the heart of appropriation, as they make it possible for events to turn into ‘meaningful’ identity markers for various types of communities.

Cultural historian Willem Frijhoff defines appropriation as the process by which groups or individuals attach their own meaning to events in order to make them acceptable.²⁰ To appropriate something means to use it for one’s own purposes. Appropriation is never neutral, but rather an inharmonious, militant, and polemical

¹² C. Rohr, *Extreme Natureereignisse im Ostalpenraum. Naturerfahrung im Spätmittelalter und am Beginn der Neuzeit*, Cologne/Weimar/Vienna, 2007, 56–61.

¹³ Rohr, *Extreme Natureereignisse*, 60–61.

¹⁴ O. Briese and T. Günther, *Katastrophe: Terminologische Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft*, *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 51 (2009) 155–195; G.J. Schenk, ‘Vormoderne Sattelzeit?: Disastro, Katastrophe, Strafgericht - Worte, Begriffe und Konzepte für rapiden Wandel im langen Mittelalter’, in: C. Meyer, K. Patzel-Mattern and G.J. Schenk (Eds), *Krisengeschichte(n): ‘Krise’ als Leitbegriff und Erzählmuster in kulturwissenschaftlicher Perspektive*, Stuttgart, 2013, 177–212; A. Nünning, *Krise als Erzählung und Metaphor: Literaturwissenschaftliche Bausteine für eine Metaphorologie und Narratologie von Krisen*, in: C. Meyer, K. Patzel-Mattern, and G.J. Schenk (eds), *Krisengeschichte(n). ‘Krise’ als Leitbegriff und Erzählmuster in kulturwissenschaftlicher Perspektive*, Stuttgart, 2013, 117–144; C. de Caprio, *Narrating Disasters: Writers and Texts. Between Historical Experience and Narrative Discourse*, in: D. Cecere, C. de Caprio, L. Gianfresco, and P. Palmieri (Eds), *Disaster Narratives in Early Modern Naples. Politics, Communication and Culture*. Translated by E.M. Ferrara, Roma, 2018, 19–40; Stefan Willer, *Katastrophen: Natur – Kultur – Geschichte*. Ein Forschungsbericht, *H-Soz-Kult* 13.09.2018, <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/forum/2018-09-001>, 3–9.

¹⁵ F. Walter, *Catastrophes: une histoire culturelle, XVIe-XXIe siècle*, Univers historique, Paris, 2008, 20–21.

¹⁶ Also see S.R. Couch, *The Cultural Scene of Disasters: Conceptualizing the Field of Disasters and Popular Culture*, *International journal of mass emergencies and disasters* 18 (2000), 23–24. Such a bottom-up approach is also implicitly encapsulated in present day the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, with its emphasis on a bottom-up understanding of why people are at risk and a more community-based approach to managing disasters, see: <https://www.undrr.org/implementing-sendai-framework/what-sendai-framework>.

¹⁷ R. Vermij, *Thinking on earthquakes in Early Modern Europe. Firm beliefs on shaky ground*, London/New York, 2021, 76.

¹⁸ Oliver-Smith, *What is a disaster?*, 30–31; L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford, 1968, 66–76.

¹⁹ R. Ros, *De opkomst van de ‘nationale ramp’. Een begripsgeschiedenis*, in: Lotte Jensen (Ed), *Crisis en catastrofe. De Nederlandse omgang met rampen in de lange negentiende eeuw*, Amsterdam, 2021, 25–46.

²⁰ W.T.M. Frijhoff, *Toeigening: van bezitsdrang naar betekenisgeving*, *Trajecta (Leuven)* 6 (1997) 108.

act, for it always entails coming to a conclusion that – by definition – excludes others.²¹ In the context of this article, it is important to realize that appropriation already starts in the process of labelling an event as disastrous. This activity entails incorporating events into a specific conceptual framework contemporaries associate with ‘disasters’, revolving around notions of unexpectedness, loss of control, incomprehensiveness, and disruption of daily life.²² And that’s not all: once these events have been construed as a disaster, writers and artists further signify and interpret them in ways that fit their worldviews and convictions. While grasping the events and coming to terms with their often horrific dynamics, people – mindfully or unintentionally – incorporate them into larger, familiar narratives, of for instance religion or politics.

Building on Frijhoff and others, we argue that the appropriation of disasters contains two ‘ingredients’. First, an actor, i.e. an author or artist, creates a *representation* that helps to interpret the phenomenon they are appropriating in a specific way. Representations are reconstructions. Therefore, they are always approximations of the past and they always express ideas and views of an individual or collective actors. Second, this representation serves as a social tool to mobilise the public and invite it to forge specific *identifications*. Before turning to the ways in which this happened in the context of disasters, we have to look more closely at these two concepts of representation and identification. Basically, a representation is the substitution of a phenomenon with a corresponding cultural artefact.²³ A representation never is nor aims to be an exact ‘copy’, but provides a interpretative perspective. Authors and artists accentuate, dramatise, aggrandise, and emotionalise the aspects they deem most important, while ignoring or downplaying others. As such, representations aim to influence and affect the ways in which contemporaries perceive, experience, and ultimately navigate in everyday life.

As we will show more extensively in the next section, the inventors of these cultural products always made use of certain motifs and techniques to produce these representations. For now, it is important again to realize that events do not have any meaning outside any societal attempt to understand them.²⁴ They only turn into disasters with the effort to interpret them. It is only when an event is perceived as a disaster and when representations are made that the phenomenon acquires its meaning and that contemporaries can recognise it as such. A representation in any shape, whether visual or textual, whether visible or audible, is therefore needed to make sense of what has happened, which entails employing modes of narration to frame the event. A representation of a disaster presents it as a story with a beginning, orders the various subevents in such a way that it becomes a recognisable chain of cause and effect, and suggests or implies an ending or communal fate for those ‘living’ the disaster.²⁵ As such, representations of disasters navigate people’s thoughts and emotions regarding the event, and enable them to *identify* with it.

This brings us to the second aspect of appropriation: identification. Identification is the process by which people relate to other individuals and groups in terms of similarity and difference.²⁶ Often, these processes are instigated, encouraged, and accelerated

using representations. Instead of ‘identity’, we prefer to use the notion of ‘identification’ because it emphasises its processual nature instead of stability and permanence.²⁷ The notion of ‘identification’ implies that the shaping of identities is dynamic, and that ‘identities’ are not impermeable concepts, but exist only by means of social and cultural processes. Another advantage of the term ‘identification’, sociologist Roger Brubaker and historian Frederick Cooper argue, is that it ‘invites us to specify the agents that do the identifying.’²⁸ For historians studying the cultural media produced after disasters, this means that they should acknowledge the creators of these media as those who ‘do the identifying’: writers, artists, publishers, and so on. We do, however, not pretend that inventors, reproducers, and consumers are separate groups; on the contrary, they formed overlapping and interlocking groups of agents. Inventors were also consumers, and consumers could in their turn become (re)producers themselves, when reacting (orally, written or in print) to the cultural products. In the next section on voice, medium, and discourse, we will explain this in more detail.

Representations are key to the processes of community building and the forging of collective identifications. While some communities result from physical proximity and are based on the daily interactions, others primarily live in the minds of people. The latter owe their existence to the ability of the members of communities to imagine them and ultimately feel part of them, as Benedict Anderson famously argued when introducing the concept of the ‘imagined community’. Despite not knowing their fellow members personally, members shared the same mental images of their communities, offering them a sense of ‘comradeship’.²⁹ Although Anderson focussed on the shaping of the nation as political imagined communities in the age of mass media, the concept can easily be applied to earlier periods and other types of communities as well, if one is prepared to use the term in a looser, more metaphorical sense, without requiring modern mass media as a prerequisite.³⁰

Representations function as identity markers, which allow individuals to feel part of something larger than their circle of close family and friends. Identification is therefore often the result of interaction with representations: through these reconstructions of the past, people are encouraged to feel part of (or to rebel against) larger, often overlapping communities. Producers of cultural media often addressed communities in spatial terms – on the urban, interurban, regional, and national levels – but also on the basis of socio-cultural qualities, such as political, ideological, and religious affiliation, gender, race, or ethnicity. Depending on the specific historical context, identification processes take place on different levels and within overlapping and intersecting categories, which means that the collectives that people could identify with should always be historicised – that is, anchored in space and time. What is more, it should be acknowledged that processes of community building by their very nature entail both inclusion and exclusion. To define who is allowed to be part of the in-group, automatically involves defining who is out.

In short, actors *appropriate* disasters: they attach their own meaning to catastrophic events in order to make them fit their narratives and navigate feelings and thoughts about these events in relation to the communities that they feel part of. More specifically,

²¹ Frijhoff, *Toeëigening*, 109.

²² Nünning, *Krise als Erzählung*.

²³ F. Ankersmit, *Historical representation*, Stanford, 2002, 11–17; S. Hall, *The Work of Representation*, in: S. Hall (Ed), *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices*, London, California, New Delhi, 2002, 17.

²⁴ Hall, *The Work of Representation*. The same can be argued for hazards; see: Krüger et al., *Cultures and disasters*; Van Bavel et al., *Disasters and history*, 29–31.

²⁵ Even across time and regions, see: A. Ekström, *Exhibiting disasters: Mediation, historicity and spectatorship*, *Media, Culture & Society* 34 (2012), 472–487.

²⁶ R. Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 4th ed., New York, 2014, 19.

²⁷ R. Brubaker and F. Cooper, *Beyond ‘Identity’*, *Theory and Society* 29 (2000), 14.

²⁸ Brubaker and Cooper, *Beyond ‘Identity’*, 14.

²⁹ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, London, 1987, 16.

³⁰ L. Jensen, *Imagining Europe. The Peace of Ryswick (1697) and the Rise of European Consciousness*, in: G. Blok, V. Kuitenbrouwer, and C. Weeda (Eds), *Imagining Communities. Historical Reflections on the Process of Community Formation*, Amsterdam, 2018, 59–75, 65.

contemporaries produce representations of disasters and invite and encourage others to identify themselves – through these representations – with specific groups in society. This means that every case needs cultural and historical contextualisation: in some the focus is on ideological, economic, or religious issues, in others on local, urban, or national community building.

Voice, medium, and discourse

Based on the methodological considerations above, we provide four sets of questions that may help in processing the source material on cultural representations of disasters. These sets of questions should not be regarded as an exhaustive checklist, but rather as inspirational guidelines to help clarify the processes of appropriation. Expanding on the basics of historical source criticism, we contend that the cultural history of disasters asks for a specific approach to classic questions. The guidelines may serve as tools to analyse the ways in which contemporaries from c. 1500 onwards have appropriated catastrophes.

First of all, the background of the author and their (intended) audiences must be determined, if possible. Whose ‘voice’ or ‘view’ is behind the representation? What is their position within society and who are they addressing? In medieval Europe, members of the literate elites – nobility, clergy, and other dignitaries – with the required resources produced texts and commissioned artworks. Yet, in the course of the sixteenth century, the invention of the printing press and the decline in paper costs made printing increasingly accessible.³¹ This meant that more and more people could share their thoughts on catastrophic events more easily. The gradual increase in literacy that had started in Europe during the Middle Ages, encouraged with urbanization, widened the access to the public sphere in subsequent centuries. The potential audiences of authors and artists grew. The common man and woman were able to use and consume representations of disasters via a wide range of media.³²

Publishing remained a male-dominated endeavour for a long time, although women sometimes continued publishing businesses started by the (deceased) husbands. Still, most interpretations of disasters remained those of men. In addition, women did find their (alternative) ways of voicing their views as well: they turned to politically ‘unsuspicious’ genres such as religious poetry, published anonymously, or under a (male) pseudonym, or chose to make use of ephemeral literature, like handwritten pamphlets.³³

This increasing number of consumers of printed texts and images did not simply adopt the author’s or artist’s view. They became appropriators themselves, choosing which parts of the producer’s interpretation they endorsed and which parts they did not. Adopting a term coined by Michel de Certeau, readers *poached* texts, borrowing what they found interesting, ignoring other parts, and adding information, thus moulding views to fit their own.³⁴ The public thus reiterated narratives while adding new layers of meaning. Scholars must therefore remain aware that

interpretations of disasters did not just ‘trickle down’, but that consumers produced their own analyses, distilling the elements that fitted with their political and religious attitudes.³⁵ To give an example: the historian Marie Luisa Allemeyer analyses the contemporaries’ ‘mental maps’ in response to early modern urban fires in German cities. Parish priests aimed to provide consolation to those affected, but at the same time, they strived to convey the ‘correct’ – that is Christian – reading of these catastrophes. Local authorities, in their turn, used those readings to their own benefit. Matthias Prieststaff, a councillor in Rostock and eyewitness of the great urban fire of 1677, incorporated the religious interpretations in his diary for tactical reasons: they served to clear him of any personal responsibility.³⁶

Secondly, the medium and genre through which contemporaries shared their views on disasters very much affected the interpretation. In early modern Europe, pamphlets and published sermons emphasised religious interpretations of floods, fires, and earthquakes.³⁷ Mostly, disasters were interpreted as punishments from God. The authors of these texts aimed at large audiences and wanted to sell them a story with general appeal. In a religious context, such as churches, survivors used images of disasters to thank and praise those who had shown mercy to them after a disaster, thus passing and affirming moral judgements in an eschatological framework.³⁸ In personal letters and local chronicles, however, people seemed to have been less concerned with these providential or eschatological readings.³⁹

Poems, songs, and printed news and images reached a far wider audience than handmade media, such as chronicles, paintings, and drawings. The larger the scope, the bigger the audience and the more chance that a specific text or image turned out to be influential. There is a caveat, however. Print was controlled more easily by state or church than manuscript. Conventional and approved interpretations of disasters therefore prevailed, while oppositional forces had to choose between discussing openly (perhaps using veiled language such as metaphors) or anonymous printing.

Alternatively, dissenting authors and artists could make use of manuscript media. Even though handmade chronicles, drawings, and handwritten leaflets had a smaller distribution range – often they were seen only by friends and family – they at least allowed for alternate and subversive viewpoints on recent catastrophes.⁴⁰ This holds true even more for oral media, including everyday conversation.⁴¹ Even though scholars will have an extraordinarily hard – if not impossible – task reconstructing everyday

³¹ D. Bellingradt, *Vernetzte Papiermärkte: Einblicke in den Amsterdamer Handel mit Papier im 18. Jahrhundert*, Cologne, 2020; E.L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, Cambridge, 1980.

³² J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge, 2015.

³³ P.R. Backscheider, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and Their Poetry: Inventing Agency, Inventing Genre*, Baltimore, 2005; S. Broomhall, *Disorder in the Natural World: The Perspectives of the Sixteenth-Century Provincial Convent*, in: J. Spinks, and D. Eichberger (Eds), *Religion, the Supernatural and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe*, 240–259; C. Font Paz and N. Geerdink (Eds), *Economic Imperatives for Women’s Writing in Early Modern Europe, Economic Imperatives for Women’s Writing in Early Modern Europe*, Leiden, 2018.

³⁴ M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, California, 2011.

³⁵ Broomhall, *Disorder in the Natural World*, 259.

³⁶ M.L. Allemeyer, *Profane Hazard or Divine Judgement? Coping with Urban Fire in the 17th Century*, *Historical Social Research* 32 (2007) 145–168.

³⁷ J.E. Morgan, *The representation and experience of English urban fire disasters, c.1580–1640*, *Historical Research* 89 (2016) 274–276; J.P. Bowen and N. Macdonald, *A dreadful phenomenon described and improved: Reverend John Fletcher’s account of the Buildwas earthquake of 1773*, *Journal of Historical Geography* 64 (2019) 80–81.

³⁸ G. Gugg, *The Missing Ex-Voto: Anthropology and Approach to Devotional Practices during the 1631 Eruption of Vesuvius*, in: Cecere et al., *Disasters Narratives*, 221–236.

³⁹ R. Esser, *‘Offer gheen water op en hadde gheweest?’ Narratives of Resilience on the Dutch Coast in the Seventeenth Century*, *Dutch Crossing* 40 (2016) 98–99; J.E. Morgan, *Understanding flooding in early modern England*, *Journal of Historical Geography* 50 (2015) 47; C. Rohr, *Man and Natural Disaster in the Late Middle Ages: The Earthquake in Carinthia and Northern Italy on 25 January 1348 and its Perception*, *Environment and History* 9 (2003): 135–136.

⁴⁰ J.S. Amelang, *The Flight of Icarus: Artisan Autobiography in Early Modern Europe*, Stanford, 1998, 63–73; J. Pollmann, *Archiving the Present and Chronicling for the Future in Early Modern Europe*, *Past & Present* 230 (2016) 237.

⁴¹ R. Darnton, *An Early Information Society: News and the Media in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, *The American Historical Review* 105 (2000) 1–35.

conversation, they must keep in mind that spoken media ultimately mattered most in the daily lives of contemporaries. The talk of the town left a big mark on the ways in which people eventually thought about disasters, but these views may have only sporadically found their way into printed representations, and even then only veiled and toned down.

The genre also affected the ways in which their inventors and producers appropriated disasters. Inventors – i.e. authors and artists – sometimes specialised in certain genres or deliberately chose the genre that offered the possibility to present a disaster in a certain way. Because of their characteristics, specific genres were more suitable than others for certain types of interpretation. An author commenting on the news in a hastily written pamphlet or an artist painting an altarpiece were likely to give a providential interpretation. Artists approached to paint a canvas for a hospital often turned to allegory which facilitated moralizing views. Authors of theatre plays could provide a more classical or mythological reading.⁴² Form and content are inextricably entwined.⁴³

An illustrative example is the genre of disaster songs. The historian Una McLivenna demonstrated that early modern English ballads were an important medium to spread news about disasters. The representation of the news was strongly influenced by generic forms and patterns: authors made use of strong, sensational and emotive language, and repetitive phrases to underline moral lessons, which were mostly of a religious nature.⁴⁴ Evoking emotions also could have made listeners more willing to donate for the victims. It helped them to feel more sympathetic towards them. Through their form, it is also likely that songs played an important role in community building because of the shared experience of singing together about traumatic events. Dutch disaster songs from the second half of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries shaped a shared sense of national identity, in particular when they were used as a means to raise money. Even songs about disasters abroad were primarily used to strengthen communal feelings at the national level.⁴⁵

Scholars must take into account that the characteristics of certain genres sometimes made them hard to interpret, even for contemporary consumers. The early modern urge to allegorise in poetry and art, for example, veiled the intended meaning of texts and images, as the author's subtext did not necessarily coincide with the readers' or viewers' interpretation.⁴⁶ As a consequence, the researcher will have to differentiate between certain, probable, and possible readings. A telling example is a canvas by Theodoor van der Schuer for Leiden's plague hospital, painted in 1682. Recently, a three-layered reading of the painting has been proposed. At first glance the image offers a view of a hospital with suffering plague victims. After a closer look viewers may notice that the three patients depicted in the painting represent three different stages of suffering as the feared disease progressed. Finally, the painting facilitated an allegorical reading of the plague as a symbol of human deprivation insisting on humility before God based on

contemporary moralistic treatises, but this reading may have been accessible only to a select elite audience.⁴⁷

Thirdly, the scholar must reconsider the source material as 'tissues of statements' – a term we borrow from historian J.G.A. Pocock.⁴⁸ Of course, one can understand a text or image as a coherent argument with an unambiguous, intended reading. However, few products are so consistent. While narrating or visualising disasters, authors and artists fall back on pre-existing tropes, narratives, and lines of thought (in short: discourses), often more than one at the same time and sometimes without consciously realising this. These intended and unintentional discourses embedded each text or visual image with various, at times seemingly incompatible interpretations of the disaster. In turn, the various discourses affected the possible ways in which consumers could eventually interpret the disaster they were informed about. It is therefore interesting to disentangle the intertextuality and intersubjectivity and situate the representation of a disaster in the various contexts through which it derived its meaning.

Take for instance the famous St Elizabeth's Flood Altar Wings in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, which represent the St Elizabeth's Flood of 1421. The meaning of the four panel paintings is still debated amongst (art) historians. Historian Simon Schama points out that the great inundations of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries marked a caesura in early modern Netherlandish history. According to him the creation of an 'eerie inland sea' was represented on the paintings, 'where spires of drowned churches were said to protrude amidst reed beds and the nests of wading birds'.⁴⁹ Art historian Hanneke van Asperen, however, argues that the image should not be considered as an illustration of the flood, but as a work that carries a moralizing message embedded in a Christian worldview which only becomes apparent to us after considering its original context. The combination of references to the historical flood with biblical references to Christ's Passion and Last Judgement, and especially the exemplary life of St Elizabeth of Hungary, reveal that the altarpiece focuses on the virtue of charity, acted out by the people of Dordrecht, who followed the virtuous example of St Elizabeth when they offered shelter to the flood victims.⁵⁰ [Fig. 1].

When taking disasters as their subject, authors and artists have drawn on a number of discourse traditions over the past centuries. As in many other works of art and literature from the pre-1900s, the classics have left significant traces in poems and paintings dealing with disasters. Certain classical works stand out, most notably Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, as various tropes in these texts turned out to resonate with the disaster experiences contemporary authors and artists sought to communicate through their works. Think of Ovid's 'Great Flood' and the 'Burning of Troy'. The same goes for another influential discourse tradition, that of Christianity: authors and artists have ardently borrowed ideas and narrative elements from the comprehensive corpus of the Christian intellectual tradition. Comparisons with 'biblical' disasters – such as the Deluge or the Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah – were commonplace, as were references to the apocalyptic Book of Revelation. These allusions and references often resulted in morally charged explanations of the present disaster as some sort of divine

⁴² R. Totaro, *Meteorology and Physiology in Early Modern Culture: Earthquakes, Human Identity, and Textual Representation*, New York, 2018, 17.

⁴³ This is also argued in S. Broomhall, *Disturbing Memories. Narrating Experiences and Emotions of Distressing Events in the French Wars of Religion*, in: E. Kuijpers, J. Pollmann, J. Müller, and J. Van der Steen (Eds), *Memory before Modernity. Practices of Memory in Early Modern Europe*, Leiden, 2013, 253–268.

⁴⁴ U. McLivenna, *Ballads of Death and Disaster: The Role of Song in Early Modern News Transmission*, in: Spinks and Zika, *Disaster, Death and the Emotions*, 275–294.

⁴⁵ L. Jensen, *Disaster upon disaster inflicted on the Dutch. Singing about natural disasters in the Netherlands, 1600–1900*, *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 134 (2019) 45–70.

⁴⁶ H.J. Helmers, *The Royalist Republic: Literature, Politics, and Religion in the Anglo-Dutch Public Sphere, 1639–1660*, Cambridge, 2015, 17.

⁴⁷ H. van Asperen, *Nothing Else Than Decay: Theodoor van der Schuer's Allegory of Human Deprivation for Leiden's Plague Hospital*, *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 12 (2020), 10.5092/jhna.12.2.4.

⁴⁸ J.G.A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge, 1985, 193–214, 193.

⁴⁹ S. Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches. An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*, Waukegan, 1987, 35.

⁵⁰ H. van Asperen, *Charity after the Flood: The Rijksmuseum's St Elizabeth and St Elizabeth's Flood Altar Wings*, *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin* 67 (2019) 30–53.



Fig. 1. Master of the St. Elizabeth's Panels, *Flood of the Grote Waard*, outside wings of an altarpiece, approx. 1490–1495, oil on panel, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

message. Similarly, scholars will find that authors have drawn their discourse from political thought – republicanism, monarchism, liberalism, socialism – harvesting the disaster to make a case about the ideal organisation of society or the alleged wrongdoings of current power figures, or political or religious groups in society.

Community building and identity formation

Besides voice, medium and discourse, scholars should, fourthly and lastly, scrutinise the communities the author or artist is constructing and confirming through their interpretation of the disaster. Since the dawn of constructivism, scholars have reassessed communities as changeable entities and their senses of self as the products of imagination, representation, and mobilisation. Sociological research into disasters showed that catastrophes can present occasions for people to experience an increased sense of belonging.⁵¹ Authors and artists often worked with these surfacing feelings of togetherness and mobilised readers into – possibly new – ways of identifying themselves as a part of a collective. They seized the experience to create narratives of a collective 'we' with a shared past and a common future, characterised by identity markers, and possibly opposed to a treacherous and dangerous enemy. The ways disastrous events were remembered through a

⁵¹ J. Drury, C. Cocking and S. Reicher, Everyone for themselves? A comparative study of crowd solidarity among emergency survivors, *British Journal of Social Psychology* 48 (2009) 487–506; A. Oliver-Smith, The brotherhood of pain: Theoretical and applied perspectives on post-disaster solidarity, in: Oliver-Smith and Hoffman, *The Angry Earth*, 156–172; A.H. Barton, *Communities in Disaster: A Sociological Analysis of Collective Stress Situations*, New York, 1969; A.F.C. Wallace, *Tornado in Worcester; an Exploratory Study of Individual and Community Behavior in an Extreme Situation*, Washington, 1956, <http://archive.org/details/tornadoinworcest00wallrich>.

wide range of cultural activities and publications also added to the feeling of belonging together as a community.⁵²

The lines along which authors and artists have predominantly constructed and cultivated collective identities have varied over time. Authors and artists appropriated disasters to signify the ties between those that already live together in face-to-face settings, such as villages, towns, and cities. As we argued before, these representations could refer to actual communities of sufferers living side by side. However, when states began to lay an ever bigger claim on the lives of their subjects, disasters were appropriated to create increasingly abstract group identities of increasing numbers of people, eventually resulting in disasters becoming key moments in the celebration of the nation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Dutch struggle against water is a telling example. Representations of Dutch flood disasters illustrate how national identification was shaped by the cultural media that communicated these events. They made use of a current set of tropes and narrative patterns, which linked the capacity of defeating the dangerous 'water-wolf' with Dutchness.⁵³ Another example is the 1882 flood in Verona. This catastrophe particularly affected the city of Verona, but the press coverage turned this regional disaster into a matter of national concern, and tied in with the emerging national narratives of the nineteenth century.⁵⁴

Likewise, disasters have time and again turned out to be opportunities to strengthen communal ties of religious groups. As disasters raise feelings of insecurity and the need for transcendental meaning, these moments have always been key in mobilising supporters for churches and other religious associations. Especially in times of religious conflict, such as the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, denominations of all stripes had the tendency to frame disasters as divine punishments for the misconduct of rivaling religious groups and, as such, assert their own superiority, recruit new members, or enhance internal cohesion. Historian Alexandra Walsham, for example, has shown how the language, interpretation and application of God's judgements in disaster discourses not only served to strengthen religious group identities, but also generated severe conflicts while 'exacerbating divisions at the highest levels of church and state discourses'.⁵⁵

A significant example from a Dutch context is the flood of 1825. For three days, from 3 to 5 February, a storm raged over the North Sea Coast and the South Sea (Zuiderzee). According to the weather historian Jan Wim Buisman, who compiled an encyclopaedic handbook of extreme weather events in the Netherlands, this flood was the worst natural disaster to occur in the Netherlands in the nineteenth century.⁵⁶ Approximately 400 people and 46,000 cattle drowned, and the financial damage was immense.⁵⁷ The event generated a lot of media attention: through newspapers, prints, songs, sermons, and leaflets citizens were informed and called to action to help the victims. Charitable enterprises raised a sky-high amount of 2.2 million guilders (approx. 25 million euro now); donations came from groups and individuals in every province and

⁵² See for instance G.H. Endfield and L. Veale, *Cultural Histories, Memories and Extreme Weather*, New York, 2018.

⁵³ Jensen, *Floods as shapers*.

⁵⁴ R. Biasillo and M. Armiero, The transformative potential of a disaster: a contextual analysis of the 1882 flood in Verona, Italy, *Journal of Historical Geography* 66 (2019) 69–80.

⁵⁵ A. Walsham, 'The Fatall Vesper'. Providentialism and anti-popey in Late Jacobean London, *Past & Present* 144 (1994) 87.

⁵⁶ J. Buisman, *Duizend jaar weer, wind en water in de lage landen*, vol. 7: 1800–1825, Franeker, 2019, 830.

⁵⁷ Buisman *Duizend jaar weer*, 830 estimates that the financial damage was 29 million guilders, which corresponds to approximately 31 million euro today.

town, including the Dutch king and people abroad. Many of the foreign donors did however have diplomatic or family connections to the Netherlands.⁵⁸ In all of these instances, the media played a crucial role in connecting people across the nation, and beyond. In other words, they helped to fashion a shared sense of responsibility. As such, they added to the process of shaping communal bonds, on transnational, national, and local levels. Showing solidarity with disaster victims was regarded evidence of being a ‘true Dutchman’, and these proclamations were so pervasive that a new wave of national ‘enthusiasm’ engulfed the nation.⁵⁹

Yet, at the same time, other groups also united in solidarity to advance their own religious, social, and political agendas. Using cultural media to prompt relief operations was as much about strengthening communal bonds as drawing borders between different groups. In the aftermath of the February Flood, for instance, quarrels broke out about the correct interpretation of the horrific event that had struck the nation. Orthodox groups argued that the Dutch people had been sinful and the government was to blame because it did not organise a national day of prayer. Adherents of a more liberal, enlightened worldview on the other hand accused the Orthodox of sowing discord and threatening national unity.⁶⁰

The same binding and dividing processes in the aftermath of disasters can be witnessed with regard to political factions and parties – in the above mentioned case the Dutch king stepped forward as the ‘father of the nation’ in times of disaster: Orangism thus became a central ingredient of collective identity, propagated in the cultural media. The game of politics – that is: the struggle for power and the collision of ideas and ideologies – has always required loyalty and mobilisation of individuals. Disasters provided political actors with possibilities to raise awareness and support for their cause. This holds true for stakeholders of the powers-that-be, but also, and possibly even more, for those who aim at overthrowing the status quo. Every revolt that is said to have been triggered by a disaster started with political actors *appropriating* the event to declare the present authorities as unjust rulers and to use argument to create a group of loyal followers.⁶¹

Conclusion

Historians of disasters show increasing interest in the cultural representations of catastrophes; they argue that media reports and artworks shaped the way people coped with and acted on hazards in the past. Additionally, some scholars hinted on the fact that disasters were regarded as events that hit specific communities, and that the representations of these events therefore tied into group identities. Disasters became part of the stories people told about

their own group or another community.

This study adds to the groundwork for the theoretical and methodological exploration of these specific dynamics – between disasters, representations, and social identities. In addition, we proposed a set of questions that could lead further inquiries in cultural representations of disasters, and a framework built around the concept of appropriation: historical actors appropriated disasters, not only to make sense of horrific events, but also to advantage their own religious, societal, and political agendas.

People appropriate disasters by two, simultaneous acts: representation and identification. Representation is the substitution of a catastrophic event with a cultural artefact, like an image or text, that corresponds to the event. During this process, an event is labelled as a disaster thus imbuing it with new meaning. This means that what is regarded as a disaster in one context does not necessarily have to be a disaster in another. Identification on the other hand is the process by which people constantly relate themselves to other individuals and groups in terms of similarity and difference. In the case of disasters, this means that historical actors define groups of victims, helpers, sympathisers, and scapegoats in their representations of the catastrophe. Who is deemed a victim, helper/sympathiser, or scapegoat, depends on the question who the identifying historical actors are and to which groups they are affiliated. In order to understand how people appropriated disasters, cultural historians should therefore look at the medium, genre, and discourses they recognise in disaster representations as well as their inventors, producers, and consumers – i.e. those ‘doing’ the identification.

Catastrophic events did not only affect people’s possessions and livelihoods, but also their identities. Writers and artists, publishers and printers, readers and viewers, both nearby and faraway from the disaster area, had to relate to the events and victims. Their representations of disasters instigated and accelerated processes of identification, because they differentiated and confirmed group identities. These processes deserve further investigation, because it enables scholars to expand current paradigms in disaster studies and generate new understandings of how disasters function in processes of collective identity formation. Disasters and their representations could bind individuals closer together, or set them apart.

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⁵⁸ J.C. Beijer, *Gedenkboek van Neerlands Watersnood, in Februarij 1825*, 's-Gravenhage, 1826, 807.

⁵⁹ Jensen, Floods as shapers.

⁶⁰ A. Kagchelland and M. Kagchelland, *Van dompers en verlichten. Een onderzoek naar de confrontatie tussen het vroege protestante Réveil en de Verlichting in Nederland (1815–1825)*, Delft, 2009.

⁶¹ Think of the numerous ‘bread’, ‘cheese’ and ‘potato’ revolts in history, caused by crop failure, droughts, or famine. For an example of scholarship that links political revolt to disasters, see J.G. Manning e.a., Volcanic Suppression of Nile Summer Flooding Triggers Revolt and Constrains Interstate Conflict in Ancient Egypt, *Nature Communications* 8 (2017) 900.