

Introduction:

“The Writing of the Disaster”

“The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact”

– Blanchot, 1995

On April 20, 2010, an explosion on a British Petroleum oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico triggered one of the largest deep-sea oil spills in history. This comes as yet another moment of ‘disaster’ among what appears as a proliferation of ‘disaster’, both in frequency and intensity. From the recent earthquakes in Haiti, Chile and Japan, and the significant differences there between, to the unrelenting ‘disaster’ of war and occupation in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and elsewhere, to the devastating response to Hurricane Katrina and back again, as oil oozes into the Mississippi Delta, engagement with the problematic of ‘disaster’ – its geographies and temporalities, its management, production and reproduction – seem ever more pressing.

Inspired by French theorist Maurice Blanchot’s *The Writing of the Disaster*, our aim for Issue 13 of *Problématique* was to explore the questions: How are we to ‘write’, engage, and critically come to terms

with the problematic of ‘disaster’ *non*? What constitutes ‘disaster’? What or who defines an event as ‘disaster’? How is ‘disaster’ seen and unseen? Remembered and unremembered? Produced and reproduced?

Only two of the five articles in the present issue address these questions, making the theme somewhat ironic. Indeed, the issue is a disparate mix of articles that defies definition and disrupts the logic we had hoped to impose on it. But the two disaster-themed articles that are included do not disappoint.

To open the issue, Alison Hugill’s “Photography of the Disaster” combines the ideas of Blanchot with those of Julia Kristeva to develop an alternative to conventional theories of photography. Disaster photography is particularly important to this project because of the very obvious “unnameable” element that lurks behind every image. Whereas conventional analyses of photography attempt to “place the medium within a historicist discourse of ‘objectivity’ by emphasizing its attestation to what *has been*” (12), Hugill argues that an alternative theory of photography rejects this fixation with cleanly fitting the unnameable, unrepresentable and disastrous aspects of a photograph into the prevailing historical narrative. Instead, she points to Craig Barber’s photographic series *Ghost in the Landscape: Vietnam Revisited* as an example of photography that is consistent with Blanchot’s notion of writing and Kristeva’s notion of “poetic language.” As Hugill explains, what is important about Barber’s images is that “the overarching historical and temporal framework (*studium*) of the series, as it is plainly stated in the title, stands in an uneasy relation to what is ultimately shown. The images themselves – a result of the ‘poetics of photography’ – disrupt the narrative in which they are placed. Just as for Blanchot, writing is a perpetual *désœuvrement* (unworking) of the writer’s aims, so too is the expected historical narrative unravelled in Barber’s photographs” (19).

Continuing on the theme of disaster images, “Botero’s Artrocity” by Arthur Imperial moves the discussion to portrayals of the disaster of the Iraq war. In particular, his point of departure is Fernando Botero’s *Abu Ghraib* series, a series of paintings and drawings that recreate, using Botero’s renowned ‘volumetric’ style of painting, written reports about the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib. While the photographic images reproduced in the news media were of course shocking and controversial for their graphic content, Imperial directs our attention towards a somewhat different problematic. He argues that Botero’s

rendition, while conceived as a cry of protest against the events at Abu Ghraib, actually works in the opposite direction, neutralizing the impact of the media photos by “aestheticizing” the atrocity. As Imperial puts it, “in order to make ‘art effective’ from an aesthetic sensibility and moreover, for the viewing audience, violent representational strategies are necessarily involved to represent the Abu-Ghraib atrocity, with the most obvious of these strategies being the substitution of the emaciated brown bodies in pain for Botero’s voluptuous white bodies” (27). Drawing on Sherene Razack, among others, Imperial dubs this process “atrocity” – an artistic act that aims to cultivate empathy in the audience by turning the suffering of others into a “story about the self” (29).

Changing tack from the main issue theme, our third article, Caleb Basnett’s “Toward a Dialectical Anthropology,” uses the ideas of Herbert Marcuse in particular and the Frankfurt School in general to offer a response to the conception of “human being” that dominates Western political thought. Basnett targets Hegel above all, asserting that his depiction of the state as the highest realization of human freedom gives rise to a very particular and limited notion of human potential. Each in their own way, Marx and Nietzsche contribute to the movement beyond Hegel’s idealism by trying to grasp human being historically and materially “as it really is,” recognizing, for example, the social relations that actual human beings must “suffer” (52). Marcuse furthers this theoretical insight, according to Basnett, by building on Walter Benjamin’s efforts to reconcile Marx’s and Nietzsche’s anthropological critiques. What emerges through this “re-alignment of sensibility, instinct, and time” is “a theory of human being as she is not yet, as the constellation of repressed potentials awaiting only the shock that will serve to actualize these potentials, crystallizing into something altogether new” (59-60).

The final two articles are included as a special section on the CUPE 3903 strike of 2008-09. While Issue 12 of *Problématique* closed with a special section on the CUPE 3903 strike of 2008-09 that included a play and two short personal narratives, the special section in this issue shifts to longer and more theoretically-based analyses of the strike.

“Onitsha? It’s Always like this in Onitsha” by Gregory Flemming uses the ideas of Slavoj Žižek to argue that the strike was too often taken as a “symptom to be interpreted” instead of a “symptom to be

enjoyed.” In the former, the strike is merely treated as a product of political-economic forces beyond the union’s control, and a “big Other” – the provincial government, the university administration, or the union’s bargaining team – is imbued with the power to deal with these forces *for* the membership. By contrast, “enjoying” one’s symptom involves “giving up on the guarantees provided by these...‘big Others’ and embracing one’s investment and direct engagement in union processes, and ultimately the organization of the university” (76). In Flemming’s view, particularly problematic was the union’s decision to grant tremendous discretionary power to the bargaining team instead of following a directly member-driven process of ‘bargaining from below’. As he puts it, “finding the root causes of the strike (neo-liberalization) and understanding the conditions in which the struggles take place (the bargaining process, for example) are not enough so long as you assume there is someone else who can fulfill your demands” (87-88).

Building on the ideas of Claude Lefort and other French political theorists, Jason Harman’s “Demanding the Impossible,” comes to a very different conclusion than Flemming’s article. Bracketing broader issues of the state of labour and the university sector today, Harman focuses instead on the internal dynamics within the union during the strike. His aim is to “immanently” critique CUPE 3903 in terms of its stated commitment to “radical democracy” (97). Harman follows Lefort’s reading of Machiavelli in asserting that the political field is inherently characterized by an antagonistic division between the rulers and the people, and that a third party – a “prince,” as Machiavelli put it – is needed to represent and manage these divisions. By the standards of radical democracy, Harman claims that the General Membership Meeting (GMM) should have occupied the position of “prince” in the case of CUPE 3903; however, this was not the case. Instead, the ‘radical’ faction of the union, which controlled the executive committee and the steward’s council, used their power to deny the fundamental divisions within the union, imposing their own unified image of the “People-as-One”. As Harman argues, “by celebrating their pretensions toward democracy and equality and deriding ‘leadership’ positions as elements of a bourgeois or business unionism, the activists attempted to efface the *real* distinction between themselves and the membership such that they could say ‘We are You’ and demand the reciprocal ‘You are Us’” (109). Contrary to Flemming, Harman argues that the November 20

GMM, the meeting in which the bargaining team was granted full discretionary power, was the truly radical democratic moment of the strike. This was where ‘the people’ revolted against the “image of Oneness” imposed on them from outside, overturning the “pre-ordained order” of the meeting, establishing 3-hour meeting limits, and freeing the bargaining team from the executive/steward’s council agenda (111).

These are the five manuscripts that comprise Issue #13 of *Problématique*. We hope you find our selections, and the resultant juxtapositions, both provocative and challenging.

Sincerely,

The *Problématique* Editorial Collective