

**War as Catastrophe:
Jacques Callot's
"Miseries of War" as Moral Meditation**

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Catastrophe(def.): An event producing a subversion of the order or system of things; an event causing great and usually sudden damage or suffering; a disaster; the catastrophe of war

Disaster(def.): An extraordinary misfortune; a calamity

I

War is catastrophe par excellence, and it is a kind of catastrophe that is largely caused by humans. Since war is often geographically widespread and long-lasting, it directly and indirectly affects far greater numbers than more spatially and temporally localized and self-contained disasters like earthquakes, floods, fires, and famines (or hunger), pandemics, mass murder, or the massive loss of life in ships, planes and trains involved in accidents or involved in other natural or man-made disasters. Less direct, but no less important, are the traumatizing and dehumanizing (catastrophic perhaps?) effects of war on soldiers and non-combatants alike. Indeed, with the possible exception of natural disasters—those which may or may not have a human casual connection—that is, disasters like hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, fire and floods—war often subsumes most of these other forms of disaster. Equally, even in the case of natural disasters, the responses of communities and language of civil preparedness commonly entail strategic or defensive (i.e., ‘warlike’) terms.

The fact that humans cause war is not to say that all wars are unjust or “unnecessary” in all circumstances. It does however suggest that reflection on the nature of war, on its causes and results, should, as it invariably does, involve an irreducibly moral component. It involves a consideration, both cognitive and affective, on the “rightness” and justice of a war, war in general as well as particular wars, along with judgements and feelings about the value or “goodness” of war. This in turn involves a consideration of, and judgment on, human nature and its frailty—including moral frailty and fragility. It also calls to mind “social contract theories” of John Locke (1632-1704) and Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), and the Hobbesian so-called “state of nature.”¹ “The social contract is an explicit or implicit agreement among citizens which justified the formation of government and emphasizes the rights of citizens in their relationship to government.”² While the “state of nature” is conceived differently in its details by Locke and Hobbes, it is for both, life without government. Locke thought people were or would work together and be

1 See Naomi Zack, “Philosophy and Disaster,” *Homeland Security Affairs* 2, Article 5, (April 2006), <http://www.hsaj.org/?article=2.1.5> and Naomi Zack, *Ethics for Disaster* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009). There is a long and distinguished history of philosophers writing on war, disaster, catastrophe and relatedly, utopia/dystopia. Thus, Zack’s claim that her “hope . . . is to introduce a new subject to philosophers” seems misplaced (“Philosophy and Disaster,” p. 2). Since 9/11 and the events that followed (e.g. the Iraq War, and the so-called “war on terror”), and Hurricane Katrina’s devastation of New Orleans, philosophical discussion relating to catastrophe has greatly increased. This includes work in ethics, environmental and social political philosophy, legal philosophy, philosophy of the built environment and technology, and so on. For example, see D. Cox, M. Levine and S. Newman, *Politics Most Unusual: Violence, Sovereignty and Democracy in the ‘War on Terror’* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Carl Cranor, *Legally Poisoned: How the Law Puts Us at Risk from Toxicants* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Onora O’Neill, *A Question of Trust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Rights, Restitution and Risks: Essays in Moral Theory*, ed. William Parent (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986). As Zack notes social justice issues abound in relation to disasters (“Philosophy and Disaster,” p. 2). Art, art history and criticism have also reacted to these events with renewed engagement. There is good reason to think that philosophy can benefit from art’s concern and insight into catastrophe—and vice versa

2 Zack, “Philosophy and Disaster,” p. 2.

cooperative. But according to Hobbes, life in a state of nature is also life in a state of war, where every person is against every other person and in which life is said to be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.”³

This essay examines Jacques Callot’s (1592/3-1635)⁴ *Les Grandes Misères et Malheurs de la Guerre* (hereafter, *Miseries of War* or *Miseries*)⁵ as a largely representational illustration of an essentially moral meditation on war as catastrophe. The work consists of eighteen prints published in 1633, the second and extended version of two series representing the privations of war. (The first, commonly called *Small Miseries of War*, was etched about 1632.) It includes scenes illustrating war’s progress from the ‘Enrolment of the Troops’ to the ‘Distribution of Awards’ and details multiple acts of aggression (arising from battle, but also pillaging, highway robbery and plunder) and extreme cruelty (torture and group execution, amongst others).⁶ The paper also uses Callot’s *Miseries* to reflect

3 Thomas Hobbes, “Chapter XIII: Of the Natural Condition of Mankind As Concerning Their Felicity, and Misery,” *Leviathan* (1651).

4 For information on Callot’s life see Averill 1969 and Bechtel 1955. For work that tries to place Callot’s *Miseries* into historical context see Goldfarb 1990; Martin 2002; Richard 1999; Sadoul 1969. The current essay is not especially concerned either with Callot’s life or with the context of *Miseries*. Nor is its focus on Wolfthal’s (1977) or Hornstein’s (2005) interpretations of the *Miseries*, although these are discussed in some detail. The call for papers for this special issue “Remembering Disaster” of *The Journal of Art Theory and Practice* asked for essays that “explore the ways in which to reflect on these phenomena [disaster and catastrophe] in relation to art. We seek discussions on examples of art, from classical to contemporary, which deals with the relation between the human and disaster.” We discuss the *Miseries* with this theme at the forefront. What does it tell us about catastrophe in relation to the human?

5 The “*Miseries of War*” refers to two series by Callot. The *Small Miseries* (1632) has six prints and the later *Large Miseries* (1633) has 18. For something about their history see Diane Wolfthal, “Jacques Callot’s *Miseries of War*,” *The Art Bulletin* 59, no.2 (1977): p. 222; Katie Hornstein, “Just Violence: Jacques Callot’s *Grandes Misères et Malheurs de la Guerre*,” *Bulletin The University of Michigan Museums of Art and Archaeology* 16 (2005).

6 Gombrich relates Callot’s work to the traditions and regional variations of 17th century Mannerist art so that, in a similar fashion to Pieter Bruegel, the Lorrainian’s inventive combinations of animated figures and wide vistas “portray the follies of mankind through scenes from the life of its outcasts, soldiers, cripples, beggars and strolling players.” E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*. (London: Phaidon, 1971 [1950]), p. 300. The particular focus on the lives, crimes and sufferings of soldiers in the *Miseries* is reinforced by at least one period commentator, Baldinucci, who states that at the time the series was

on the nature of catastrophe as such, particularly as “An event producing a subversion of the order or system of things.” As such, catastrophe refers less to nature or the natural gone awry, than it does to the abnegation or suspension of moral aspects of human nature. When seen from this perspective, Callot’s work invites comparison to other events and representational genre, comparisons which might otherwise be stifled or disallowed owing to limits imposed by the particular concerns of art historians, the passing of time and the succession of visual media. More than a meditation on war as catastrophe, and catastrophe as fundamentally moral, the *Miseries* are a timeless meditation on aspects of the human condition; or on human beings in what amounts to state of nature—as evidenced in times of disaster.

II

Such reflection, again, does not by itself imply that all war—even when catastrophic— is unnecessary, let alone necessarily unjust. But it does suggest that artistic engagement with war understood as catastrophic may yield insights into human nature that are as important to human self-understanding as those represented in artistic subject matter that is more quotidian. It raises questions concerning the relevance of Callot’s work for his times and ours. The question of just how the *Miseries* is to be interpreted has a long history among art historians and others. Is Callot’s series condemning war generally or only a particular war? Is it largely a comment on just and unjust ways of waging war? Is it evidence of his

commonly called “*la Vita del Soldato*.” Cited by Wolfthal, “Jacques Callot’s *Miseries of War*,” pp. 222-223. Likewise, the scenes associated with the two series do not appear to glorify war by depicting the grand movements of armies and surrounded and besieged cities as do other period illustrations of battles.

patriotism, a view Diane Wolfthal⁷ rejects, or possibly a specific protest against the French invasion of Lorraine during The Thirty Years' War?⁸ Or, does the series merely reflect a certain kind of entrepreneurship, involving the packaging up and selling of once topical subject matter?

Katie Horenstein, for example, writes:

Since the seventeenth century scholars have attempted with mixed results to pin down an overarching meaning for the *Misères*. The earliest interpretation contends that Callot etched the series to protest Louis XIII's invasion of his native Lorraine, which had been an autonomous duchy until it was conquered by the French in 1635. According to such a reading, the atrocities committed by soldiers in each image are understood to be perpetrated by French troops on the undeserving and victimized citizens of Lorraine, thus setting up a dichotomy between good and evil, innocent victims pitted against barbaric victimizers.⁹

This interpretation goes beyond “patriotism” to theology, religion and sociology as likely contexts for interpreting the *Miseries*. The reasons Horenstein gives for rejecting it however focus largely on the implausibility of seeing the series as an expression of Callot's patriotism. This essay is not primarily concerned with revisiting or adjudicating between various interpretations of the *Miseries*. It is doubtful, for the time being at any rate, that there is anything new to add to that debate. Nevertheless, examining the series and interpreting it anew can reveal something of Callot's understanding (as well as our own) of catastrophe and the relation between ‘the human’ and disaster.

7 Wolfthal, “Jacques Callot's *Miseries of War*,” p. 224.

8 For accounts of the various interpretations, some of which overlap, along with reasons for rejecting many of them, see Wolfthal, “Jacques Callot's *Miseries of War*,”; Horenstein “Just Violence.” Wolfthal (p. 224), says: “Interpretations are often conflicting and none has gained wide acceptance.”

9 Horenstein, “Just Violence,” p. 30.

The prints present a narrative sequence. After the title page there is the aforementioned etching illustrating the recruitment of soldiers followed by “Battle.” Under the “Enrolment” image is the following poem: “That metal which Pluto encloses within his veins, which at the same time causes peace and war, draws the soldier, without fear of danger, from the place of his birth to foreign lands, where, having embarked to follow the military, he must arm himself with virtue to combat vice.”¹⁰The poem is ironic in view of the five images that immediately follow. These depict soldiers not in war per se, but acting in lawless manner—pillaging, plundering, burning, raping, and otherwise attacking and killing villagers (innocents) and taking prisoners.¹¹

In “Plundering and Burning a Village” the accompanying poem reads: “Those whom Mars nourishes with his evil deeds, treat in this manner the poor country people. They take them prisoner, burn their villages and even wreak havoc on their livestock. Neither fear of the law, nor sense of duty, nor tears and cries can move them.”¹²These prints are followed by one depicting the capture of the soldiers and five depicting their punishment. Visually, the most gruesome and best known of these is “The Hanging” which depicts a tree full of hung soldiers as well as soldiers under the hanging tree.



Fig. 1 Jacques Callot, *The Hanging* from the suite *The Miseries and Misfortunes of War*, Print, 8.1 x 18.6cm (platemark), 1633, Author’s Collection

10 Howard Daniel, ed., *Callot’s Etchings* (New York: Dover, 1974), p. 266.

11 The poem and five images seem to be saying that war is in itself not immoral, but the soldier’s conduct in times of war can be. (This is basically the same view that today underscores the idea of war crime trials, as well as debates over whether perpetrators of terrorist acts are technically ‘enemy combatants’ and so entitled to rights under the Geneva Convention.)

12 Daniel, *Callot’s Etchings*, p. 272.

The latter are “gambling for their place in the line to meet the hangman, that is, for their life, short though it will be in any event.”¹³ Wolfthal describes this scene of the gamblers as “especially poignant” but it might better be described as disturbing, macabre and dark. The series goes on to depict sick and dying soldiers, followed by “Revenge of the Peasants” and finally the “Distribution of Awards” to soldiers. The claim that the series is not only a condemnation of war but a meditation on what happens when, as in war, society as such breaks down, is grounded in the representational content of the series as a whole, that is, in the story it tells.

Even without the accompanying poems, it would be hard to wring an endorsement of war out of these prints. With the accompanying verse, it is virtually impossible.¹⁴ One’s reaction to what some of the prints visually depict is visceral and immediate. It is therefore hard to accept Wolfthal’s contention that “Callot’s Miseries are difficult to understand at first glance,”¹⁵ or that as compared with Francisco de Goya (1746-1828) (Disasters of War series, 1810) who “unmistakably communicates his condemnation of war,” “Callot seems enigmatic.”¹⁶ While the sources of Callot’s condemnation of war may be subject to dispute, the claim that the Miseries is anything other than a condemnation and register of disgust and perhaps bafflement on Callot’s part should not be. Callot’s prints are obviously stylistically different from Goya’s.¹⁷ But on the basis of that

13 Wolfthal, “Jacques Callot’s Miseries of War,” p. 225.

14 Wolfthal, says “Except for the title page, these prints are inscribed with verses attributed to Michel de Marolles, Abbé de Villeloin ... Even though Callot did not compose the verses, one supposes that he must have approved them.” Wolfthal, p. 222.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 222.

16 Wolfthal, quotes Ternois. The “nuance exacte [of the Miseries] est si difficile à saisir.” Wolfthal, “Jacques Callot’s Miseries of War,” p. 222. In addition to Wolfthal’s comparison between Callot’s series and Goya’s, see Goldfarb 1990 and Hornstein 2005. Hornstein appears to largely Wolfthal’s view that as compared with Goya Callot’s stance towards war is less clear is not enigmatic. While we see Callot’s series as being no less strident in condemning the horrors of war than Goya’s, the comparison is not particularly relevant to this essay.

17 H.T. Goldfarb, “Callot and the Miseries of War: The Artist, His Intentions, and His Context,” in *Fatal*

difference, or on account of their content, to see them as anything other than a condemnation of war, whatever else they may be—is to allow another kind of consideration to outweigh the visual impact of the series. In any case, virtually everything that Wolfthal goes on to say conflicts with her claim that the *Miseries* are enigmatic.¹⁸ For example, she claims that instead of glorifying or aggrandizing war—one of the two “major reactions to war in the seventeenth century”—Callot’s *Miseries* “consists of compassion and indignation in response to war,” the second of the major reactions to war. She furthermore points out that Callot “reflects” seventeenth century writers on wars’ preoccupation “with the distinction between just and unjust causes and the conduct of war.”¹⁹ In short, despite whatever may be puzzling about them, Wolfthal sees the *Miseries* as the considered condemnation of war they are.

Nevertheless, as an interpretation of the *Miseries* not only does this not go far enough; it may well miss the principal point of the series. And in any case, Wolfthal’s specific interpretation of Callot’s moral point of view and judgement is problematic. For example, Wolfthal says “Callot condemns the abuses of the soldiers.... He supports their severe punishment in order to curb these abuses. Finally, he advocates rewarding the virtuous soldiers.”²⁰ There are, for instance, no grounds internal to the series itself for saying that Callot supports the severe punishment, let alone brutalization and torture, of the soldiers.

On the basis of the prints alone, or even considered along with their

Consequences: Callot, Goya, and the Horrors of War, ed. H.T. Goldfarb and R. Wolf (Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, 1990), pp. 13-26.

18 Hornstein talks about moral ambiguity in the series as well. She says “This shifting terrain of subjectivity, perspective, and circumstance throughout the series ensures an intense moral ambiguity surrounding victimization, violence, and justice, which reaches its peak in these three scenes of the suffering soldiers.” Hornstein, “Just Violence,” p. 44.

19 Wolfthal, p. 225.

20 Wolfthal, “Jacques Callot’s *Miseries of War*,” p. 225.

depiction of the abrogation of duty, justice, and the moral-legal order in general? It is not a case of “might makes right” but of a catastrophic breakdown of justice and any moral sense of what is “right.”

Compare Wolfthal’s interpretation with that of Hornstein. “What takes precedence in the eighteen images... is not a polemic in favour of a particular nation, religion, or class. Rather, there is an insistent focus on the relationships that diverse groups of people have towards the violence that accompanies war: those who endure it, those who observe it, and those who actively partake in it.”²⁴There is nothing wrong with this observation in general terms, though it is unclear as to what is meant by “the relationships that diverse groups of people have towards the violence that accompanies war.” Hornstein’s schema is certainly generalising. One relationship is that of groups who are directly traumatised by war, others that simply witness, etc. In any case, it tells us little by way of interpreting the series. Why does Callot focus on the scenes he does and what is he trying to say? Hornstein²⁵rejects, as ahistorical, Philippe Martin’s interpretation that “above all, Callot wanted to deliver a message: to denounce the absurdity of violence.”²⁶She sees it as ahistorical on the grounds that it is an imposition of a contemporary attitude towards war. Nevertheless, Martin’s view about Callot’s intent with the series is consistent with and similar to the one in this essay.

Hornstein says “What is truly remarkable about these depictions is not their so-called realism...but rather the extent to which they confound the slippery divide between people who enact wartime violence and those who suffer from it.”²⁷What does this mean? There is a difference—

24 Hornstein, “Just Violence,” p. 30.

25 Ibid., p. 33.

26 P. Martin, *Une Guerre de Trente Ans en Lorraine 1631-1661* (Metz: Éditions Serpenoise, 2002), p. 235.

27 Hornstein, “Just Violence,” p. 33.

and “no slippery divide,” at least not necessarily, between perpetrators of war crimes and their victims. This is so whether the soldiers are the perpetrators or the victims of war crimes.²⁸

Perhaps what Hornstein has in mind is the often made observation as to how in war the oppressed become the oppressors. Callot however is saying something more than and other than this. He is reflecting on the conditions that bring such a morally abject situation about, as well as describing (picturing) what it is like. Catastrophic events like war result in anomie: “a subversion of the order [especially moral order] or system of things.” Clifford Geertz explains both the nature of this threat as well as specific ways in which anomie threatens us.

[Man] can adapt himself somehow to anything his imagination can cope with; but he cannot deal with Chaos. Because his characteristic function and highest asset is conception, his greatest fright is to meet what he cannot construe... [Suzanne Langer (1948: 287)] ... There are at least three points where chaos—a tumult of events which lack not just interpretations but interpretability—threatens to break in upon man: at the limits of his analytic capacities, at the limits of his powers of endurance, and at the limits of his moral insight. Bafflement, suffering, and a sense of intractable ethical paradox are all, if they become intense enough or are sustained long enough, radical challenges to the proposition that life is comprehensible and that we can, by taking thought, orient ourselves effectively within it...²⁹

Hornstein comes closer to Callot’s intent when she says “... Callot calls

28 A comparable example might be the acquiescence of the mainstream German population to Nazi atrocities, or, in more recent times, the seeming disinterest of western populations to growing genocide in Rwanda. Perhaps this is the kind of imprecise divide Hornstein is describing. Conceding the point may be a way of asserting how the prints cannot be anything other than a condemnation of war for if all are involved in perpetrating it (either by direct action or simply by witnessing it) then there is no ‘just’ side.

29 Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 99-100.

into question the morality that underpins conventional assumptions about heroic action and victimization in wartime relations among human subjects.³⁰ In any case, why suppose that Callot denouncing the violence of war as absurd in the 17th century was necessarily ahistorical? Why suppose that then, as now, there was not a range of views, perceptions, and attitudes on the violence that war unleashes?

It is important to consider the series in its entirety and as a series; that is, as telling a story. Doing so adds a narrative dimension that aids interpretation as long as one supposes that the narrative—a consideration of the series as structured and in its entirety, is essential to understanding the series as a whole along with the role of individual prints. Individually, any one of the miseries depicted might be taken representationally as portraying or reporting, without any judgment, moral or otherwise, some event of war—as in “The Hanging.” Individually, any of the prints depicting (moral) horrors could be interpreted as morally endorsing those practices. Alternatively they could be seen as evidence of sadism (or masochism) on Callot’s part. Perhaps he sadistically enjoyed depicting the “Strappado,” or imaginatively delighted in awaiting his turn on the “Wheel.”

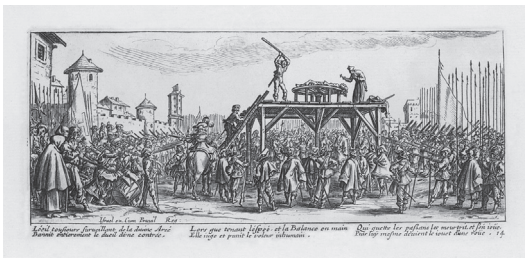


Fig. 3 Jacques Callot, *The Wheel* from the suite *The Miseries and Misfortunes of War*, Print, 8.2 x 18.5cm (platemark), 1633, Author’s Collection

The same may be said of the series in its entirety—that is, that its

30 Hornstein, “Just Violence,” p. 36.

meaning is ambiguous as between condemnation and endorsement, but even absent of additional evidence, interpreting the series as a narrative lends some support to one view over the other. Wolfthal suggests that in the Miseries Callot “was also satisfying his love for scenes of violence and low types.”³¹ But it is unclear what she thinks this “love” amounts to. Does she mean he literally enjoyed them as scenes of violence, enjoyed portraying them—that is, because they were violent?

Thus, while it is possible to interpret the entire series as Callot endorsing or even applauding war (though the title of the series itself suggests otherwise), just as it is possible to so interpret “Hanging,” “Strappado,” or the others on their own; it is less plausible to interpret the series itself in such a way.



Fig. 4 Jacques Callot, *The Strappado* from the suite *The Miseries and Misfortunes of War*, Print, 8.3 x 19.1cm (platemark), 1633, Author’s Collection

Further, none of the additional evidence available suggests that Callot was a war monger or a sadist, and some of it does suggest he was disturbed by and otherwise condemned what happened (murder, theft, rape) during The Thirty Years’ War; that is, the invasion and decimation of his homeland.³² Any number of alternative and diametrically opposed narratives to the series could, and of course have been constructed or concocted. But apart from additional “outside” information, any narrative that sees the series as a moral (or sadistic) celebration of war, or even as a judicious and

31 Wolfthal, “Jacques Callot’s Miseries of War,” p. 233.
 32 Cf. Wolfthal, “Jacques Callot’s Miseries of War.”

balanced judgement regarding the nature and necessity of war—would run into difficulties concerning cogency that an interpretation which sees Callot as horrified and disturbed by what he sees, does not.

While there is little doubt that, as Wolfthal³³ concludes, Callot is in a sense morally condemning war in illustrating in great detail its miseries and horrors; the series taken as whole indicates he is doing more than this. Seeing the series as a moral meditation on war as catastrophe, suggests that its purpose and its value (and Callot's intention) is not merely or even primarily to condemn war, but to show us what happens, and so who we are—or an important part of who we are, in the absence of ordinary moral and legal strictures. He does so by illustrating the catastrophe that war inevitably is, showing us what happens in war, what we do, what we are capable of, and even what we think. The series, so far as we can tell, makes no case, theological, ethical or otherwise, for the essential sinfulness or evil of mankind or for some ontologically grounded and unalterable Manichean principle at work in the universe. The *Miseries* simply shows us what war and all catastrophes tell us about ourselves as uncovered in disastrous circumstances—though perhaps not necessarily as we need to be.

III

Thus far we have been looking at the connection between catastrophe and disaster by focusing on the *Miseries* and what Callot seems to be suggesting about war. But we have also seen that the connection can be approached from the other side, that of the nature of catastrophe, as well.

³³ *Ibid.*

Let's briefly look at the nature of catastrophe again.

Naomi Zack claims that disasters often result in what she terms a second state of nature rather than any original state of nature.³⁴

At first, it may seem as though conditions under which individual survival requires private measures are a return to a state of nature, however temporarily. But this is not the literal case because present social and material structures have not only removed us from an original condition, but made it very difficult to return to one in a short period of time. ... The destruction of an existing society's material basis of human life does not return human beings to an original state of nature, because it does not return them to conditions under which self-sufficient survival is possible.³⁵

Such a second state of nature is, like the hypothesised original state of nature, a life without the benefits of government. On a Hobbesian account, it is life in a kind of state of war, where even if it is not the case, as Hobbes would have it, of every man against every man, there is no moral/legal order or way of supporting one. No one has any moral or legal claim against anyone else. Along with the physical destruction of the material necessities of life, the anomie that invariably results from catastrophes like war threatens the physical and mental ability of those most affected to survive, cope and endure. Along with this, it may at times threaten a sense of even being able to endure. Callot's *Miseries* conveys this sense of hopelessness and helplessness that accompanies the chaos brought about by war.

Zack says "Both Locke and Hobbes began with Natural Law [God's

34 "The question in terms of social contract theory is this: "What does government owe citizens in situations in which government is temporarily dysfunctional, that is, in the second state of nature?" Zack, "Philosophy and Disaster," p. 4.

35 Zack, "Philosophy and Disaster," p. 3.

rules for men in the state of nature] in constructing their theories about the role of government and its justification. The difference between them was that Locke thought humankind obeyed the first principle of Natural Law, that they not harm one another, whereas Hobbes (*Leviathan*, chap. XIV, XV) thought humans were incapable of keeping the peace without government.”³⁶If numerous catastrophes are any indication, it would seem, as Zack also notes, that Hobbes rather than Locke was largely correct. “Hobbes’ view of the warlike and dangerous nature of human beings in conditions without government seems to have provided the most prudent description of what can happen domestically when government breaks down.”³⁷

Disasters, Zack says “always occasion surprise and shock; they are unwanted by those affected by them, although not always unpredictable. In this sense, the effects of war on civilian populations maybe disastrous, although wars have elements of agency, systematic planning, and the active involvement of legitimate government, which distinguish them from disasters.”³⁸Of course, the effects of war are generally disastrous on non-civilian populations (i.e. the military) as well. And why Zack supposes that “agency,” “systematic planning,” or the participation of “legitimate government” etc. in any way distinguishes the effects of war from other disasters is unclear. Perhaps she is assuming that in the case of war there is an element of avoidability that characterizes its effects.

Incidents of hurricanes, earthquakes, fire and floods and so forth—phenomena commonly perceived to have their origins in ‘nature’ rather than human society— may provide an exception to the connection examined thus far between disaster, catastrophe and anomie. These

36 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

38 *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

incidents may be largely unavoidable and so require a different kind of thinking or they may frame different aspects of the human condition in a state of nature compared to Callot's *Miseries*. The distinction is a tenuous one as far as disaster studies goes, particularly humanities-based research and specific studies into the representation of disaster in literature, cinema and other media.³⁹ There is a prevailing view that all disasters, including ostensibly natural ones, are social phenomena, for being either attributable to human action in some degree or subject to the human sciences and related discourses, representational genre, art forms and values. Take the case of Hurricane Katrina and its representation in the media.

After its waters receded, Katrina lingered in the plight of former residents of New Orleans and the US gulf coast. It lingered in debates over the exact cause (and avoidability) of the city's destruction and protracted litigation "strangling recovery."⁴⁰ Disagreement focussed on either a storm of unprecedented ferocity, on the one hand, or storm protection and civil defence systems that had proven inadequately designed or maintained, on the other. To characterize Katrina's destruction of New Orleans as natural disaster, or wholly a natural disaster is in a sense misleading. Much of what was (and remains) catastrophic about Katrina is not just the physical destruction of life, the city and property, but of the city's social identity and along with it people's means and ways of living—to an extent many observers thought the US government had launched a war on its own people.

39 See M.K. Booker, *The dystopian impulse in modern literature: fiction as social criticism*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994); T. Halper, and D. Muzzio, "Hobbes in the City: Urban Dystopias in American Movies," *The Journal of American Culture* 30,4 (2007): pp. 379-390; A. Ashlin, and R. Ladle, "Natural disasters and newspapers: Post-tsunami environmental discourse," *Environmental Hazards* 7 (2007): pp. 330-341; and Susan Sontag, "The Imagination of Disaster," in *Against Interpretation and other Essays*, Susan Sontag, (New York: Dell, 1979 [1965]), pp. 209-225.

40 See J. O'Byrne, "Insurance industry greed strangling recovery," *The Times Picayune*, November 15, 2006.

Coupled with extensive press coverage and editorials rather than a few lines of poetry appended to some etchings, the photographic record of New Orleans that appeared after Katrina framed a catastrophe initiated by a hurricane rather than war, but ultimately caused by the abject failure of multiple levels of government. Photography and video footage emerged as powerful media for depicting anomie on the ground in Louisiana and conjuring the spectre of social instability abroad.

International reaction to the plight of New Orleans shows how the scale of the destruction and its demonstration in these media underscored the political significance of this event. An editorial in *The Age* argued that Katrina exposed the “catastrophic failure” and possibly “the end of the privatisation experiment” following decades of neo-liberal policies resulting in the neglect of public investment in infrastructure and privatisation of the public sphere.⁴¹ Gerhard Schröder’s campaign for re-election in Germany on a platform against further “American” (i.e., neo-liberal economic) reforms coincided with the catastrophe. Photographs of the flooded city, its failed infrastructure and burning buildings, its “floating bodies and gun-toting shopkeepers” were credited with his gaining a further 10% in the polls.⁴² Pictures of survivors scrambling for help on rooftops and the saga of refugees in the Superdome—a building now as symbolic of America’s failings as its “rust-belt” cities like Detroit—drew comment on the precarious state of racial and economic inequality in the country and the incompetence of its leaders. An editorial *The Australian* observed how “for days governments in the richest, most powerful nation in the world left people in New Orleans in a Hobbesian horror of hunger and violence.”⁴³

41 Editorial, *The Age*, Melbourne, 6 September, 2005: p. 12.

42 *Christian Science Monitor*, 13 October, 2005.

43 Editorial, “Disastrous Planning,” *The Australian*, 9 September, 2005.

There is nothing in a Hobbesian state of nature, where everyone is against everyone else, which would prevent people from having and exhibiting a moral sensibility, or even, as the bumper sticker says, from practicing random acts of kindness. Thus, a catastrophe like the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans can be described as one in which citizens as well as officials sometimes took advantage of one another where and when they could; many broke the law; and otherwise preyed upon and even killed one another. We know this happens. However, this is not meant to exclude the many ordinary and heroic acts of courage, kindness and concern that those caught up in the disaster exhibited. Many of these actions serve to accentuate the inaction, ineptitude and lack of decency let alone compassion, exhibited by many of the officials—including those at the highest level—in charge of responding to those in need—in need through no fault of their own.

It would have been possible, though out of keeping with the narrative context and significance of the *Miseries*, for Callot to have included a scene of defiant heroism or common kindness among his scenes of war, pillage and torture. Being a product of our times and modern invention, we know far more about the provenance and likely intentions behind the now iconic photograph of President Bush looking out the window of his plane onto the devastation that followed in Katrina's wake. We know who the photographer was and could figure out, if the need arose, what camera was used and even the aperture size and shutter speed that captured the image and moment. Despite the availability of these facts, the meaning of the photographic image is no more certain—no more pre-determined, precise and invariable—than that of Callot's etchings for the art historian. Any likely original aesthetic intention has been superseded by its widespread interpretation as a picture of remoteness and ruinous

leadership.



Fig. 5 Christopher Morris/VII, *Hurricane Katrina*, Photograph, August 31 2005, Corbis News Premium

IV

Hornstein cites Susan Sontag's essay *Regarding the Pain of Others* in which Sontag discusses Callot's *Miseries*. Hornstein says Sontag places the series "in an art historical context tradition of 'representing atrocious suffering as something to be deplored, and if possible, stopped.'"⁴⁴ Hornstein continues, "the notion of putting a stop to wartime violence may or may not have been Callot's concern.... It is doubtful that the *Misères* is an antiwar polemic. Instead, its achievement rests in depicting war-related violence as a problem concerning diverse groups of the community, from a constantly changing relativistic perspective, without making absolute assessments of guilt."⁴⁵ It is unclear what Hornstein thinks an "antiwar polemic" is. Nevertheless, whether the "purpose" of the series is as Sontag describes it, or indeed as Hornstein herself describes its "achievement," the *Miseries* should be seen not merely as condemning the atrocities ingredient in war, and so war itself, but as reflection through depiction of what catastrophes such as war bring about. What reason

44 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2002), p. 42.

45 Hornstein, "Just Violence," p. 45.

might one have for doing so other than to report on, warn, and if possible try to prevent such disasters? The long histories of utopian and dystopian literature and related traditions in media like photography and film have at least one thing in common. Their respective visions of either perfected or socially alienated worlds are commonly prompted by political criticism of the status quo and point to its reform.

Although Sontag explicitly discusses Callot in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, her earlier essay on science fiction films, “The Imagination of Disaster”, provides more fertile ground for interpreting the *Miseries* in relation to catastrophe in other visual art forms, including photography and cinema. This may seem surprising since, after all, how can an account of the nature of science fiction—what is going on in science fiction films—help with an interpretation of the *Miseries*? As Sontag notes “From a psychological point of view, the imagination of disaster does not greatly differ from one period in history to another.”⁴⁶ “Science fiction films are strongly moralistic,”⁴⁷ and yet “There is absolutely no social criticism of even the most implicit kind, in science fiction films. No criticism... of the conditions ... which create the impersonality and dehumanization which science fiction fantasies displace onto the influence of an alien It.”⁴⁸

A good deal of what Sontag discusses in this essay has to do with the nature of catastrophe—catastrophe on a global scale where what is being considered is the obliteration of earth or life as we know it on earth. She discusses science fictions from the 1950s and 60s (significantly, during

46 Sontag, “The Imagination of Disaster”, p. 224. She goes on to say “But from a political and moral point of view, it does.”

47 *Ibid.*, p. 216. “The imagery of science fiction films will satisfy the most bellicose addict of war films, for a lot of the satisfactions of war films pass, untransformed, into science fiction films.” *Ibid.*, p. 219.

48 Sontag, “The Imagination of Disaster”, p. 223.

the height of the Cold War) and viewers' attraction to them as reflecting a broadly-held fear of catastrophe as well as ambivalence towards science, scientists and technology. Her discussion, with some modification, remains relevant today, given the spate of more recent natural disaster films like *Volcano* (1997), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), and *2012* (2009). The appeal of these films might be understood in view of present day environmental uncertainties or perhaps a state of anxiety in the world more generally. However, their coincidence with documentary coverage of very real cataclysmic events—such as the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami's destruction of Banda Aceh and Hurricane Katrina's impact on New Orleans in 2005—leads one to question how different media represent the complex reality of fallen society, the circumstances which bring such events about, and their social and personal costs.

Sontag goes on to discuss the various strategies and manners in which science fiction deals with such fear; for example, through positing a bifurcation between good and evil, and relatedly, by grossly oversimplifying the moral complexity of situations it allows one to “give outlet to cruel or at least amoral feelings”⁴⁹ and to exercise feelings of superiority—moral and otherwise. In the case of the psychology of science fiction this largely has to do with repressing ambiguous feelings regarding science and technology and seeking quick fixes by means of fantasy and invulnerable heroes. Nevertheless, much of what Sontag says can straightforwardly be applied to catastrophe generally and war in particular. “[A]longside the hopeful fantasy of moral simplification and international unity embodied in the science fiction films lurk the deepest anxieties about contemporary existence.”⁵⁰

49 *Ibid.*, p. 215.

50 Sontag, “The Imagination of Disaster,” p. 220.

Callot's *Miseries* and science fiction as portrayed by Sontag address similar problems concerning ways in which meaning and a much needed sense of order are challenged and undermined by catastrophic events such as war. Sontag says:

In the [Science Fiction] films it is by means of images and sounds, not words that have to be translated by the imagination, that one can participate in the fantasy of living through one's own death and more, the death of cities, the destruction of humanity itself. Science fiction films are not about science. They are about disaster, which is one of the oldest subjects in art. In science fiction films disaster is rarely viewed intensively; it is always extensive. It is a matter of quality and ingenuity... the science fiction film ... is concerned with the aesthetics of disaster... [a]nd it is in the imagery of destruction that the core of a good science fiction film lies.⁵¹

In the *Miseries*, disaster, though widespread, is viewed intensively. But in both the *Miseries* and science fiction, the disturbances, moral and emotional as well as material or physical, are constitutive of the disaster, leaving people without either the mental or physical abilities they need to cope. In both science fiction and Callot's *Miseries*, government is either absent or essentially useless. We find ourselves in what amounts to a second state of nature as described by Zack.

There is however a tremendous difference in the way in which Callot, as opposed to science fiction, addresses the problem of anomie. Callot's vision is bleaker—one might say, more finely etched—and far closer to reality and truth than are the phantastic, temporarily (transiently) gratifying, morally unproblematic and otherwise easy, resolutions to the catastrophic scenarios that science fiction imaginatively envisions. These latter resolutions are the easy happy endings that typically

51 *Ibid.*, pp. 212-13.

serve to temporarily assuage the very fears— chaos, annihilation or enslavement— that give rise to science fiction in the first place. However, more than merely portraying the folly of war, Callot depicts how such catastrophe undermines and dismantles the structures—material structures to be sure but also those of justice, human kindness and affectivity—that enable us and give us the wherewithal, to function and that are shown to be inimical to, or the antithesis of, catastrophe as such. Callot’s *Miseries* depict a world in which disaster dispenses with civilization while catastrophe necessarily displaces it.

Keywords

catastrophe, disaster, Callot, war, anomie, nature, science fiction

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**War as Catastrophe:
Jacques Callot's "Miseries of War" as Moral Meditation**

Michael Levine and William Taylor(The University of Western Australia)

This essay examines Jacques Callot's *Les Grandes Misères et Malheurs de la Guerre* (1633) as a moral meditation on war as catastrophe. It also uses Callot's *Miseries* to reflect on the nature of catastrophe as such, particularly as "An event producing a subversion of the order or system of things." As such, catastrophe refers less to nature or the natural gone awry, than it does to the abnegation or suspension of moral aspects of human nature. More than a reflection on war as catastrophe, and catastrophe as fundamentally moral, Callot's *Miseries* are a timeless meditation on aspects of the human condition; or on human beings in what amounts to state of nature—as evidenced in times of disaster. Such reflection, again, does not by itself imply that all war—even when catastrophic—is unnecessary, let alone necessarily unjust. But it does suggest that artistic engagement with war understood as catastrophic, may yield insights into human nature that are as important to human self-understanding as those represented in artistic subject matter that is more quotidian.