

## Disaster narratives through material culture

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This study proposes to explore material culture, more specifically the narratives generated from it, as one significant element in the construction of disaster. As an entryway into this topic, it first contextualizes material culture within the process of meaning production happening throughout the disaster process.

While disasters are the expression of material, objective processes (e.g. an earthquake), they are not contained within the narrow boundaries of objective reality and can also be framed as a social construct, the result of complex socio-cultural processes impacting the material expression of the world. In other words, they happen, like most of the human experience, in “betwixt and between” (Biersack, 1999). Within this perspective, disasters are also the product of the combination of a multitude of narratives that shape what individuals and groups perceive and understand as disaster. The disruption caused by such events generates an instant flow of narratives that attempt to make sense of what has happened. The major cultural domains (politics, economics, science, etc.) produce their own, through different media, and individuals and groups absorb them to different degrees, combining them with their own. A variety of narratives thus emerge along the phases of the disaster process and beyond, allowing first recognition of what has transpired, then, through

assimilation, ultimately an ongoing recreation of reality. This process of assimilation and construction happens, mediated through language.

Part of this production of meaning happens through contact with the surrounding material culture, the narratives it forces on us, and the narratives we build from it. Harre (2002) explores different principles for theorizing objects, two of which particularly relevant in our discussion: first the fact that objects are set apart from a generic storyline, transformed “into a social object by (their) embedment in a narrative”, and second, objects express their power and their significance “only in the contexts of the narratives in which they are embedded”. The junction of the exosemiotic and semiotic worlds is where meaning and reality are constructed.

The main objective of this paper is to outline the beginning of an exploration into the construction of disaster through material culture and start setting the conceptual base for further discussion.