

## The Seismic Order

### Jean Baudrillard

The seismic order is the future. It constitutes the congenital order of catastrophe in the age of simulation (I don't know why) – an unfathomable and bottomless form of the crevice, the rupture and the crack, the order of bursting and brittle objects; the order by which immense masses of earth and entire regions slide over the other, producing violent surface tremors. We are no longer taken aback by the destructive lava: a fire-spitting mouth covering the earth and bringing with it punishment and purification. Here, it is not the Flood that is being referred to, but rather a primal catastrophe as at the beginning of the world; to be exact the great, legendary and mythical orders which are forever monopolizing our attention. The explosion which culminated as an order (principle) in the frenzy following the nuclear catastrophe, appears to have more to do with the present (conversely it also backed up the myth of the Big Bang as being the origin of the universe). The earthquake, the seismic order has, one could say, a more modern and more topical nature, confirming yet again that catastrophes adapt themselves to their relevant cultural order. Cities also distinguish themselves through a certain order of catastrophe relative to them, constituting in each case the keen fascination of the city in question. For New York it is King-Kong, black-out and the vertical bombardment.

Towering inferno. Los Angeles represents a horizontal break and the gliding away of California into the Pacific. Earthquake. Today we are confronted with an order which is even closer to mind: it belongs to the system of fissions and immediate diffusion; comparable to a system of waves, a spasmodic order and direct (polar) reversal. The sky no longer falls on our heads, but the ground is now slipping away from under our feet. We find ourselves in a universe that can be hewn apart, in pack-ice, in a horizontal drift. The earthquake menacing (threatening) us also provokes a breaking open of spaces in an intellectual sense; the blasting apart of almost inseparable things, the forcing apart of objects being drawn together in the vacuum. For, fundamentally (!) speaking, there never was a foundation or a profundity, but only a cracked surface which, as everybody knows, is in a state of fusion. The earthquakes tell us that they are the requiem of the underground. And we will no longer have to watch out anxiously for the stars or the sky, but for the underground deities who are threatening to plunge us into the abyss.

Intercept the energy behind earthquakes: sheer madness; it would be just as mad to win energy from road accidents, runover dogs, from everything that perishes and breaks down. A new perspective, perhaps even a new hypothesis: if all things tend towards perishing and breaking down, then accidents and catastrophes could become the main source of energy in the future. One thing is certain: if we can't even manage to intercept seismic energy, we can never manage to calm the symbolic wave: symbolic energy (if one can term it as such), i.e. the power of fascination and irony produced by such an occurrence is in no proportion to the destructive material energy potential it releases.

And it is precisely this symbolic power, the bursting energy of a catastrophe that we want to harness in one mad plan; and in an even more direct plan we will want to foresee earthquakes, to be able to beat them with evacuation schemes. The ridiculous thing is that the experts from San Francisco who are most proficient (!) in this field have figured out that calling a state of emergency with evacuation because of an imminent earthquake would create a panic, the effects of which would be more devastating than the catastrophe itself. Here, too, a complete farce (of the system; but not an irony of fate). For want of a real catastrophe it should at least be permitted to trigger off a catastrophe by means of simulation. A catastrophe which will be just as good as the real thing and which will make an even better substitute for it, too. We have to ask ourselves if this is in fact what is haunting the minds of the "experts"- exactly the same thing is happening in the nuclear field: Aren't the preventative and dissuasive systems playing their roles as potential centres of catastrophe? Under the pretext of wanting to prevent the catastrophe, they bear the consequences of this right to the imminent, to the here and now. This again confirms that destruction cannot be left to chance: a direct equivalent must be found in the protective and dissuasive system.

Therefore, it is obvious that a State or some other Power, even if they are in good enough a position to foresee the earthquake and anticipate its consequences, in the last instance they threaten the survival of the species even more than the earthquake itself. The Terremotati (earthquakes) in southern Italy hit the Italian State hard on account of its carelessness (the media were on the spot before the relief organizations, a clear token of the present hierarchy of priorities and the real (re)course of things; rightly so, the political system was blamed for the catastrophe (in as much as it pretends to be nothing more than a mere terrorist welfare service for certain groups of people), but never in a blue moon would anyone think about an order which in itself would be capable of such a dissuasion of the catastrophe: the price would be, strictly speaking, that everyone would prefer the catastrophe – with its misery, it corresponds at least to the prophetic need for a violent end and the strong need to scorn the political system. The same is true for terrorism: what kind of State is that which is able to nip terrorism in the bud and eliminate it (FRG)? Does it not have to equip itself with its own terrorism and in doing so simply generalize terror at all levels? What is the real price for such security and are we all seriously dreaming about this?

### **POMPEII REVISITED**

Everything in this city is meta-physical, right down to the dreamlike geometry which does not appear to be a spatial, but rather in intellectual geometry of the labyrinths – on this side of time and which freezes even more in the midday heat. What a superb psychical experience, the tangible presence of the ruins, their energy, their shadows, their commonplaceness. The coincidence of the banality of a stroll and the immanence of another time, another unequalled point in time, the moment of catastrophe. The murderous presence of the volcano kept in reserve gives the dead streets the appeal of an hallucination – the illusion of having been here before one's own birth, in the here and now, on the eve of the eruption, and of rising again two thousand years later, dead and yet alive again thanks to a wonder of nostalgia, in the deep immanence of a former life. Only a few places leave such an impression of the uncanny (it is not a mere coincidence that Jensen and Freud\* set the "psychical" acting of Gradiva there). One can feel all the warmth of death here, which is enhanced by the fossils and the ephemeral traces of the everyday life: the depressions of the (dead-beat) wheels on the stone, the wearing away of the fountains, the petrified wood of a half-open door, the folds in the toga of a body buried in ash – there is no historic time between these things and us, no time to bestow upon the monuments their prestige: here, in the warmth of death taking them by surprise, they instantly become material. It is

not the monumentality, not the beauty that is fundamental to Pompeji, but more the intimacy of things, the fascination of their immediacy; it is, so-to-speak, the perfect simulation of our own death.

Pompeji represents a kind of Trompe-l'oeil and primal scene: the same ecstasy minus the real dimension of time – the same hallucination with an additional dimension, that is a transparency of the very smallest detail of your life; like the true vision we get of the bottom of the sea or of live trees sunk to the bottom of an artificial lake when we float over them when swimming.

The intellectual effect of the catastrophe is to stop things before they reach their end and to keep them in the eternal suspense of their perishing.

Pompeii: devastated yet again by an earthquake. What kind of catastrophe is that, that can prey so wildly upon ruins? What kind of ruins is that, that need to be constantly torn down and buried? The sadistic irony of catastrophe: it is secretly waiting for things, even ruins to assume their beauty and their relevance again, to be able to destroy them again; it takes extra-special care that the illusion of eternity is destroyed, yet it also trifles with this by freezing things into a second eternity. This is the very attraction of Pompeii, the mortification, the fact that an active life is frozen by a catastrophic immediacy. The first catastrophe, the vulcano, was a success. That of the earthquake is much more problematic. It seems to be burlesquely obeying the rule of doubles. The silly rehearsal of the big premiere. The completion of a great fate; a pitiful godlike Nature lent a helping hand here. But perhaps the earthquake has some other relevance, that is, of warning us that the days of overwhelming landslides and resurrections, the days of playing games of transitoriness and eternity are over; instead of these, thanks to progressive deferment, there are the small-scale sensations, as it were, "sweet" annihilations, with no new dawn, as it is these very traces that will eradicate this new fate. This all serves to acquaint us with the horizontal age of sensations with no consequences, where the last act is staged almost like a parody, by Nature itself.

*\* Compare S. Freud: Der Wahn and die Träume in W. Jensens "Gradiva" with the text from Wilhelm Jensens tale (Published and with an introduction by B. Urban and J. Cremerius), Frankfurt, M. 1983 (pocket book edition).*