Olaf Probst, *Katastrophäe IX + hi-s-stoeryies*

Juliane Prade-Weiss

Catastrophes surround us, befall us, captivate us – both collective catastrophes and personal catastrophes: the climate crisis and the resulting extinction of species, water scarcity, microplastics being found in all our organs, wars with global repercussions, such as the conflict between the US, Israel, and Iran, which may well lead to a worldwide economic downturn, as well as fertilizer shortages resulting in famine for millions of people, along with wars and armed conflicts with catastrophic effects on local populations, such as in Ukraine, Gaza, and Sudan, from which people flee to other regions, meaning that these conflicts do not remain local at all in the long term. The interconnectedness of war and its consequences, climate, and poverty has a global effect. But there are also personal catastrophes such as a serious illness, the death of loved ones or financial ruin, which take the focus away from global issues. And then there are catastrophes that have not yet occurred, but appear ever more threatening through their discussion in the media and in conversations: nuclear weapons capable of wiping out civilizations, the risks of nuclear energy, the wildly varying predictions regarding the consequences of applying artificial intelligence in all areas of life, and further virus pandemics. It is impossible to pay the necessary attention to all of these catastrophes in equal measure. At the same time though, it would be personally unwise and socially ignorant to live as if none of them existed. Olaf Probst's *Katastrophäen* seem to me to suggest that one should get used to the idea of the catastrophe: giving it space, making it tangible, but at the same time placing limits upon it. The occurrence of *Katastrophäen* in these spaces draws attention to the central dynamics with which catastrophes occur:

Catastrophes have causes and concrete effects; they are not a figment of the imagination. However, they only appear as a catastrophe—a term drawn from the theory of tragedy, denoting the downward turn towards the end, towards death – that is to say, as a life-altering event, when they are understood and discussed as such. However, this discursive nature is complicated: neither a severe illness nor the environmental catastrophe disappears if I deny its existence or ignore the relevant discourse. Nevertheless, the public discussion of a catastrophe adds something that a medical symptom, a climate phenomenon, or a war lacks: catastrophes demand attention. They are a spectacle. Much like Olaf Probst's *Katastrophäen*, they place themselves in the limelight - glittering, gleaming, garish, and in the way. Each *Katastrophäe* strives to be the coryphaeus, so to speak, i.e. - in the context of tragedy - the chorus leader who sets the tone. Yet there is only one such figure per play; there are never multiple coryphaei on stage at the same time—whereas here, the *Katastrophäen* jostle about, vying to outdo one another.

The problem with the attention demanded by global and personal catastrophes is indeed that there is never just one. Greek tragedies are actually much too optimistic in this regard: there, a limited sphere of activity meets its demise due to a single factor. In our case, however,

there seem to be at least twenty-five such factors. This logic of escalation underpinning media-propagated catastrophes often seems to veer towards seriality. *"And yet another one"*, one might easily think when opening a newspaper online or in print, or when watching the news. *Of course, yet another one.*

When it comes to seriality, some are inclined to speak of a "hollowing out leaving only the ritual." Yet repeatability and predictability do not render rituals empty, but effective: it is precisely these qualities that enable rituals – i.e. a combination of conventionalized words and actions - to imbue something with meaning. The alarming passage of time can be given structure through such patterns: *first make a coffee, first have the child baptized. Christmas again!* And perhaps it is also a relief to at least know what it is—the war, hunger, plastic in the brain, the fatal illness, the layoff. *It is a catastrophe!* This makes the event more apparent, gives it a name and a comprehensible symbolic form. Olaf Probst's *Katastrophäen* possess a physical form. They also demonstrate the power of the ritual: I can pick up the *Katastrophäe* in my hands, show it to other people, and place it in the corner of the living room beside the sofa. *"I think we should even hang it on the wall!"*

Once I have grasped that which has beset me as a catastrophe, I have—it seems—turned it into a trophy, a symbol of victory. Militarily, a trophy is an insignia of the enemy left behind when retreating. Personal bankruptcy, mass violence, or the collapse of the global economy unfortunately do not flee, no matter how angrily I stare at them. Understanding something as a catastrophe, therefore, is not to subdue an external enemy, but rather an internal one: my disorientation, lack of knowledge, sense of being overwhelmed, fear. Once I have understood that it is *yet another catastrophe*, once I hold that trophy in my hand, I can better concern myself with the matter—or indeed with the attention economy surrounding the state of catastrophe. And I can think to myself: isn't a catastrophe actually a bit *trashy*? Or, at the very least, *camp*?

Unlike catastrophes that threaten me physically and consume me entirely, these *Katastrophäen* offer a fair deal, so to speak: they claim space for their performance and provide space in which to admire them and to marvel at the form in which the catastrophe is presented.