

# JE ME SOUVIENS

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At the beginning of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, the narrator intones, "The play is memory. Being a memory play, it is sentimental, it is dimly lighted, it is not realistic". The connotations are negative, as if it is a problem that memory naturally means mistakes and difficulties. But without memory, what else is there?

In the context of disaster, this question is perhaps the fundamental point of the 2013 international conference "(Dis)Memory of disaster" run by the University of Madeira, the volume from which follows this introduction. Memory is explored in multiple dimensions, as representation, as perception, as imprinting, as interpretation, as experience, as memorialisation, and as learning. Memory guides us in understanding and dealing with disasters and is, in turn, guided by what we wish to retain and highlight following a disaster or endeavours to deal with disasters. Memory does not create reality so much as becomes reality.

*The Matrix* film trilogy explores the ding of memory and reality, with characters at various times querying that, if they do not remember reality, if all they know is what they see and think they are experiencing, then what difference does it make? In disaster, it can make a difference in that focusing on a constructed memory of destruction can in itself be destructive. Survivors often continually replay disaster images in their minds and in their dreams, failing to escape the vivid detail of memory.

The media can be culpable, seeking to perpetuate that vividness and have those affected reiterate their experiences. For some, the retelling and publicity help; for others, it harms. The media, though, have their own representations, as we learn in these chapters, such as for Madeira floods. These representations - what is and is not shown, what is and is not written - can create the collective memory of the disaster. Where that differs from people's own memories, who judges which one is dismemory and how is that judgement made?

Differing perceptions can move towards an answer. Other papers in this volume examine the numerous variables influencing perception of risk and perception of disaster. Identity, familiarity, and voyeurism emerge in historical and contemporary processes of disaster. The conference sought "to constitute a space for both academic and civic debate and to question the implications" of creating, portraying, and exploring memory and dismemory in disaster contexts. The poignant comparisons of (dis)aster and (dis)memory from around the world and from different centuries provide thoughtful evidence-based analysis on family emergency preparedness, spatial planning, narrative forms for memorialisation, and depictions of disaster reality. Who could criticise any selectivity in what we choose to recall?

In the Philip K. Dick short story *We Can Remember It for You Wholesale*, a company offers false, implanted memories which become muddled for a client when his requests turn out to be based on his real but suppressed experiences. Dick's novels and stories frequently

explore confusion amongst reality, experience, and memory, often based on hallucinogens, psychedelics, and other drugs, so presumably drawing on his own experimentations. His worlds are dystopically wavering realities, peopled by cut-outs adrift and seeking to escape their authoritarian governance by grasping at a flimsy anticipated memory of something better than their duty and routine. The power of controlling memory and experience is key.

Grasping that power and controlling that memory assists in many situations portrayed in the papers here. From poetry to paintings of catastrophe, memory is captured and controlled as part of taking power from disaster, to learn from it, to live with it, and to improve from it. In Dick's work, experience, memory, and reality tend to diverge. In these chapters, their confluence supports the understanding of why disasters happen along with efforts by the people most affected to take control of their situations and to avoid others ending up with similar calamitous experiences. In the art, that might mean altering experience to alter memory—to represent the disaster as we wish to have it remembered.

*Memento* is a film about Leonard Shelby who has no short-term memory but who is searching for a man who he believes murdered his wife. Shelby can speak, drive, function day-to-day, and recall fragments of his life, but not what happened five minutes, five days, or five weeks ago. Even as he is manipulated by those around him, he takes control, creating his own tattooed and polaroid mementos which then become his artificially remembered reality. He relates how "I have to believe in a world outside my own mind. I have to believe that my actions still have meaning, even if I can't remember them".

How much does that apply to dealing with disasters, that if our actions save lives, they have meaning, even if no one can remember them because the disaster averted rarely garners attention? Shelby continues, "If we can't make memories, we can't heal". In disaster, not remembering is one way to heal, to forget the tragedy and the devastation, instead accepting a calm, stable life in which calamity does not appear. Until it does. Ultimately, collective forgetting and denial might not help for dealing with disaster, whereas collective memory can lead to positive collective action.

The papers in this volume meld memory and dismemory, representation and misrepresentation, expression and unexpression, all in the context of different forms and interpretations of disaster and dealing with it. They evoke critical thinking for disaster in terms of media, memorialisation, and representation, recognising the interplay of disaster-related action with perceived understandings of what a disaster meant or could mean. Underlying is the subtext of control and responsiveness—collectiveness and individuality for remembering disaster with the hope that we can avoid recurrence. A hope which, in turn, morphs the memory of disaster into something we wish to remember, often sentimentally, perhaps dimly lit, and with debatable realism. We create the menagerie of memory and the discourse of disaster, intertwined to be as fragile as our illusions that our social structures and infrastructure reduce vulnerability.

We create the memory, but the memory creates us. We create disaster, then the disaster creates us.