Worst Cases: Terror and Catastrophe in the Popular Imagination

Lee Clarke. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Planes crash, bridges collapse, and ships sink. Such unintended consequences of sophisticated forms of technology are the subject matter for Lee Clarke's analysis of "worst cases." Contemplating the full range of modern disasters and catastrophes is necessary for an adequate understanding of the fear and dread that animates our everyday lives. Worst case disasters stem from events being uncontrollable and are usually described as "unthinkable." However, as the author observes, "Thinking about the worst case may seem to be neurotic, but it should be seen as normal."

The social thinking based on probability stands in sharp contrast to the emphasis on the worst-case scenario. The distinction has particular relevance for the planning process and policy decisions. For example, before the explosion of the Challenger, space launch decisions were based primarily on probabilities. Notions about acceptable risk prevailed rather than considering the likelihood of disaster. Clarke notes, "We put ourselves in harm's way by the ways we organize, or fail to organize our lives."

Another form of worst-case analysis consists of the counterfactuals involved in the questions of "what if" and "if only." Counterfactual thinking has become of special interest in such reflections as how the world would have been different if the South had won the Civil War or if Nazi Germany had invaded England rather than waging a two-front war. Reflections on the sinking of the *Titanic* provide an excellent example of how contingent thinking could be applied. For example, the deleterious consequences of the sinking might have been avoided if there had been enough lifeboats, if the crew had been better trained, if the *Californian* had come to the rescue of the *Titanic*, if Captain Smith of the *Titanic* had stopped the ship for the night. Retrospective forms of examination are designed to avoid similar episodes in the future.

In the chapter *Power, Politics, and Power*, Clarke addresses four issues: risk communication, the problem of panic, the greatest worst case Americans face, and the issue of scapegoating and blame. There are, in the United States today, overblown emphases on dangers and risks in the health care field. These include, for example, the anthrax scare, the fear of mad cow disease, and a potential pandemic from an avian flu outbreak. Public officials frequently draw upon the myth of a potential panic response to deny access to control-relevant information.

The disaster in Bhopal, India was reviewed as a worst case scenario. Several thousand people were killed from a highly toxic chemical explosion. There are similar chemical plants located in the United States, and all are vulnerable. The train transportation of toxic waste materials through such densely populated areas as Baltimore and Washington could have similar effects. When disasters do occur there usually follows an emphasis upon retrospective judgments, scapegoating, and placing blame.

Clarke notes that along with the grief and suffering that accompanies catastrophes, there are also people who benefit. The poor, the aged, and racial minorities are disproportionately among those who are affected negatively. There are many groups and individuals, however, that benefit from the misery and suffering of a disaster. For example, school expenditures were increased by 275% after the Russians launched the first Sputnik. The political popularity of President George W. Bush and New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani increased dramatically following the terrorist attack of 9/11.

Professor Clarke's book will be of interest to both faculty and students in the areas of cultural

studies. The themes of the books lend themselves to elaboration in mass entertainment and popular culture, as well as in several areas of the social sciences. We are indeed living in a world characterized by the potentials for worst-case scenarios. Viruses, earthquakes, hurricanes, terrorist attacks, and toxic chemical explosions are normal outcomes of the worlds we have created. Accordingly, risk and uncertainty have become routine attributes of the psychology of modernity.

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Writing Back to Modern Art: After Greenberg, Fried, and Clark

Jonathan Harris. London: Routledge, 2005.

For the past two decades, discussions of the role of aesthetic value or evaluation in art criticism have been increasingly displaced by the growth of the interdisciplinary field of inquiry known as visual studies. Antihierarchical in its relationship to high art, visual studies emerged in the late 1980s as a challenge to previous considerations of the role of art, theory, and history. While a welcome departure from the conservative tendencies present in many of the traditional practices of art history, visual studies shunted aside questions concerning value and evaluation in art in favor of a more inclusive approach to the visual that downplayed such outmoded concerns. The new book by Jonathan Harris, *Writing Back to Modern Art: After Greenberg, Fried, and Clark*, reframes the consideration of value and evaluation in the context of three of the most important writers on these concepts in the last sixty years. It is no surprise for Harris to analyze the question of value in relationship to the work of the modernist art critics Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried but Harris' book splices the critical dialogue between those two in order to insert one of their most important interlocutors, the art historian T. J. Clark (considered one of the most important figures in the development of social, as well as the "new," art history).

Clark's inclusion in this discussion highlights how much his work fundamentally departs from the work of Fried and Greenberg but, more importantly from Harris' perspective, and also demonstrates that what the three writers share: "fundamentally, is a belief that criticism (that is, saying what art is good or bad, and why), theory (i.e., mobilizing 'first principles' about the nature of the world, and how it may be understood), and history (i.e., accounting for change and development in culture and society) are interconnected and mutually conditioned things" (1). Harris' analysis of Greenberg, Fried, and Clark's critical exchanges dramatically elevates the consideration of value and evaluation in a serious manner out of its moribund status in recent cultural analysis. However, as Harris notes, he began his study with a very deep skepticism about the role of value and what constitutes the greatness of any particular work of art, a skepticism which continues unabated up to the present.

For Harris this study represents his "best attempt to engage as doggedly as [he] can with the materiality of, the 'thinglyness'—to use Heidegger's rather ugly neologism—of artworks, as well as simultaneously, with what [he believes] are the major critical explanations of these artworks' value" (5). The conclusion of the book draws the reader back into a consideration of issues of gender, ethnicity, and the "postcolonial" without an uncritical valorization of visual studies in the postmodern era as the necessary riposte to Greenberg, Fried, and Clark. Rather, for Harris, it is, "The *continuities*, that is, between the modern and the postmodern—in art, culture, and social developments; the immanent possibilities and threats of 'annihilation' or 'totality'—[that] remain profoundly more significant than any