

Book Review

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Nathaniel O’Grady, *Governing Future Emergencies: Lived Relations to Risk in the UK Fire and Rescue Service*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. 149 pp.: ISBN 9783319719900, \$99.99 (hbk).

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Nathaniel O’Grady’s *Governing Future Emergencies* is all too pertinent, written as the Grenfell Tower fire was unfolding. Such events govern a book’s reception as well as haunt its reading. But it is 9/11 where O’Grady begins, riding in an SUV with a firefighter for the Fire Department New York (FDNY) who was there on 11 September 2001. O’Grady admits that ‘that day’ (p. 2) had haunted his own preparation for the trip to New York. He had spent time rereading the official report into the tragedy, listening to ‘too many’ (p. 2) YouTube clips of 911 calls, and on arrival in the city, visiting the then-incomplete memorial site and gift shop. O’Grady perhaps justifiably mentions that he wanted to move on from talking about 9/11, but the problem with the ‘post-9/11’ world is that it’s truly very difficult to move on from, not least for those who directly experienced its horror. The same can now be said for Grenfell Tower, a continuing haunting of our collective understanding of fire and its volatile potential.

However, fire, as O’Grady articulates, has always been mediated. Chapter 2 begins with a genealogy of the fire service in the United Kingdom, and more specifically, with the emergence of ‘fire governance’. Leaning both on Foucault and object-oriented philosophy, O’Grady posits that fire that can be conceptualized as an object ‘for itself’ (Bryant, 2013: 19) composed differently during the Great Fire of London of 1666 (as mobile and circulatory), the 18th century (as insurable), and the Second World War (as incendiary). Across these many moments, fire itself ‘undergoes continual remaking as responsibility for its governance ossifies and extends’ (p. 44). To this, of course, one might also suggest the opposite: that *because* its governance ossifies and extends, particular articulations of fire may weigh heavy on its ‘elemental-material’ (p. 24) form, despite attempts to render fire as an object for, and in, itself.

What this inevitably means is that fire entails sensemaking, not least an ability to ‘make sense of the future’ (p. 49) as O’Grady argues from Chapter 3 onward. This sensemaking, he continues, is dependent upon a complex digital infrastructure enabling various interfaces – or, ‘intersections, moments and encounters’ (p. 53) – to take place between the UK Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) and emergent fire events. As O’Grady abstractly suggests, infrastructures are a ‘set of objects used to render fire emergencies as risks of the future’ (p. 53). Such infrastructures enable the comprehension of fire, arguably as a perceptive ‘threshold’ at which an event ideally triggers action or a chain of necessary responses.

As O’Grady proceeds, actual software comprising actual interfaces, come into view. These include an Incident Reporting System (IRS), a Fire Service Emergency Cover Toolkit (FSEC), and later in Chapter 4, a graphic motion technology called Particle Illusion. These interfaces are, as O’Grady argues, ‘a general condition of everyday life in organisations reliant on digital technologies’ (p. 62), and the data that are captured through the FRS’ IRS at three different sites feed into analytic tools such as the FSEC, in order to map and manage fire risk. Further software such as Particle Illusion bring these data back to life, so to speak, by offering an ‘audio-visual representation of fire events’ with ‘in-built “fire graphics”’ depicting both ‘flames and smoke’ (p. 74). O’Grady considers fire to have been historically framed as mobile and circulatory, insurable, and incendiary; but it is evident from *Governing Future Emergencies* that it is ‘poly-’ or ‘multivalent’ (Gerlitz, 2016) at any one time, due in part to the fire-object’s elemental properties or capacities, but also invariably due to the representational power of the digital infrastructure enabling its sensemaking.

O’Grady’s book is unfortunately timely. Yet much of this timeliness only bubbles under the surface. Chapter 5’s analysis of Mosaic, a software designed by credit checking company Experian, gestures toward the significance of understanding fire vulnerability as unevenly distributed. In one area, O’Grady notices that Mosaic identified one particular lifestyle group, K50, defined as ‘Older families in low-value housing in traditional industrial areas’, was connected to, or victim of, ‘13.56% of all fires’ despite comprising of only 10.40% of all people living in the region (p. 95). In other words, some people are more at risk than others. However, what Mosaic doesn’t capture, or is able to make sense of, is lived experience. It transpires that functional alcoholics, ‘disproportionately female, in [their] forties and perhaps recently unemployed’ (p. 103) are most at risk, according to a Fire Investigator interviewed by O’Grady. What *Governing Future Emergencies* touches on, tantalizingly, is a more just articulation of how digital infrastructures mask, as well as reveal, such vulnerabilities. In as much, the book is a blueprint for the future governing of emergencies, as well as a diagnosis of the governing of future emergencies.

Accordingly, the book should be of value to those interested in how digital media modulates risk, capturing some of these ‘lived experiences’ within decision-making architectures, while evidently eliding others. For cultural and political geographers like O’Grady, there is a distinct spatial logic to these operations that demands greater exploration; some people, in some places, are more exposed than others. For everyone else, O’Grady demonstrates how high theory from Barad to Bergson can be mobilized to make sense of empirical work, from the posthuman capacity to act, to the temporal experience of risk. In this, *Governing Future Emergencies* successfully pulls off a difficult trick, helping *us* to make sense of an increasingly senseless world.

References

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Author biography

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