

LISBON, 1755

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“Lisbon, 1755. A thriving metropolis. Everyday galleons bring gold from the colonies; but in the depth of the oceans deadly forces are stirring.” The voice-over that accompanies the trailer for what is announced as a forthcoming documentary created for the German television channel ZDF, announces in a reasonably polished British English but in appropriately dramatic tone, the disaster that befell the city of Lisbon and which, so it would seem, can now be turned to in a search of enlightenment and spectacle.¹ In a sense, the 1755 earthquake, significantly dubbed by the documentary makers as “the first mega-catastrophe of modern times,” is a prime candidate for televised sensation in an age marred by continuous catastrophes. 2005, the year in which the 250th anniversary of the Lisbon disaster was remembered with a large number of scholarly activities, was, so to speak, ushered in by the Sumatra-Andaman earthquake of 26 December 2004, a fresh disaster of monumental proportions that also lent tragic actuality to the study of the Lisbon earthquake.

2005 was different from other commemorations of the Lisbon earthquake in a variety of ways. Most importantly, it distinguished itself by a number of important events and subsequent publications, in stark contrast to previous commemorations, which had remained poor, even at a symbolic level, and left merely ephemeral contributions. By contradistinction, 2005 saw several important conferences dedicated to 1755 and approaching it from a variety of disciplines in both the sciences and the humanities, of which one can single out two large, almost simultaneous, independent conferences hosted at the University of Lisbon in November, as well as a conference held in Germany in October.² The reference newspaper, *Público*, published a special dossier on the earthquake and, in collaboration with the Fundação Luso-Americana para o Desenvolvimento (FLAD), also four

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volumes of documentation and studies on the earthquake that provide a wealth of materials and were immediately sold out.³ The Portuguese edition of *National Geographic* for November 2005 was also dedicated to the 1755 earthquake and one could list many more, more or less popularizing articles, special issues, and other news on the 1755 earthquake aimed at a wide public. Thus, at both a scholarly as well as a popular level, 2005 saw an unparalleled surge of attention given to 1755 and its consequences.

The importance of 1755 can be defined in various terms. Historically, even though it was not the first large earthquake to hit Portugal, it certainly was the one that caused most damage and loss of life. The damage also had repercussions for other countries with established commercial delegations in Lisbon and this, not unlike what was seen with reference to the Swedish tourists who perished in the Sumatra-Andaman earthquake of 2004—originated wide attention outside of Portugal. Furthermore, the intellectual climate of the time was such that the earthquake was seized upon as a point of contention and can be said to have brought down Leibnizian optimism, so that it can be used as well as a marker in western thought. The ethical discussions that take 1755 as a starting or central point raged then and continue still today. A ready example can be taken from Susan Neiman's important study on *Evil in Modern Thought* (2002; 2004), which opens with the striking statement that: "The eighteenth century used the word Lisbon much as we use the word Auschwitz today" (1). But one could also think about Michel Serres, writing in *Le Figaro*, of 31 December 2004 on the issue of international solidarity in the face of extreme disasters and evoking precisely 1755. Furthermore, 1755 has also always been used as a focus for discussing power and traditionally, considerations of the earthquake have all veered towards discussions of the role and influence of the Marquis of Pombal.

From the many publications that came out around 2005, I would like to call special attention to three as they not only have substantially added to previous studies—in many cases small or of difficult access—but have also inaugurated a

shift in the treatment of the topic. João Duarte Fonseca's 2004 bilingual, Portuguese and English, book on 1755 could be mistaken for a coffee-table edition but is actually a very important resource and arguably the most significant publication after the large study published by Isabel de Campos in 1998 and which has been out of print for considerable time. One of the most significant contributions to appear in 2005 is the collection of essays edited by Helena Carvalhão Buescu and Gonçalo Cordeiro, *O Grande Terramoto de Lisboa: Ficar Diferente* (2005). And the third publication is the four volume edition of documents and studies undertaken by FLAD and *Público*: Volume 1 on *O Grande Terramoto de Lisboa: Descrições*; Volume 2 on *O Grande Terramoto de Lisboa: A Protecção*; Volume 3 on *Sobre as Causas dos Terramotos*; and Volume 4 on *Providências do Marquês de Pombal* (2005). Added to this short list, given its potential dissemination and reach, one should also mention two issues of the *European Review*, partially dedicated to studies of 1755 (Volume 14, numbers 2 and 3, 2006).

Although there can be no doubt that all of the studies arising from 2005 have profoundly reshaped our knowledge of 1755 and altered, in a positive sense, the tendency to privilege certain views of 1755, either by focusing on ignored aspects of the catastrophe, or by theorizing responses to it, some elements still remain unchanged, such as an overdue concentration on the figure of the Marquis of Pombal. This is not to detract at all from the importance of such studies—Kenneth Maxwell's 1995 book on the subject remains very significant. But one does wonder why studies purporting to reflect on the earthquake still end up, more often than not, turning into a discussion of the Marquis such as the recent essay by Ana Cristina Araújo (2006). Still, 2005 set the tone for a renewed approach to the importance of 1755 that goes far beyond the fascination with despotic power or the appropriation of catastrophic events for spectacular consumption and provided an important impetus to continue researching the myriad aspects related to the earthquake and its representations.

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One such event was the colloquium organized by Orlanda Azevedo and Deolinda Adão at the University of California at Berkeley on October, 2006, under the heading “Days that Change the World: The Great Quakes of Lisbon (1755) and San Francisco (1906),” which attempted to establish comparative reflections on the two events. Three of the papers presented at this initiative, generously supported by the Instituto Camões, focused on the Lisbon earthquake and are at the base of the essays published in this volume of *ellipsis*. Helena Buescu builds on work previously published to consider how a natural disaster can only be comprehended in cultural terms and proceeds to analyze a significant number of responses to the event from a transdiscursive and transgeneric perspective. Likewise, Estela Vieira in her essay considers a great variety of literary representations of the 1755 earthquake, including recent ones, in an enquiry into processes of cultural memory and their imbrications in terms of the formation of national identity. My own contribution, more limited in scope, takes as departing point a remarkable contemporary document so as to essay a consideration of the discourse on catastrophe and some of its ethical dimensions. The essays here presented are but a small element of the renewal of interest in 1755 but they reflect, variously, the desire to shift research on 1755 to include a more theoretical perspective whilst remaining solidly anchored in historical contextualization. They also seek to address questions of representation perceived as central to understanding the role of the 1755 earthquake in the construction of a Portuguese and European identity. For the possibility of publishing these essays in this issue of *ellipsis*, I would like to thank the organizers of the Berkeley colloquium, the Instituto Camões for its financial support of that event, the anonymous readers who provided significant comments towards the revision of the original essays, and, very especially, Phillip Rothwell, who, in his capacity as editor, generously received my initial proposal with enthusiasm.

Notes:

1. The documentary has been announced for some time now and was due to be released December 2006, but it seems not to have been concluded yet. For more information please consult: http://www.zdf-enterprises.de/de/1755_das_erdbeben_von_lissabon.88.htm?template=d_zdfe_programm&skip=&sort=sheadline_en&order=asc

2. The conferences held in Lisbon were: International Conference on the 250th Anniversary of the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake, organized by João Belo Rodeia et al, 1 November to 4 November 2005 (<http://www.mundiconvenius.pt/2005/lisbon1755/committee.htm>); and Colóquio Internacional “O Grande Terramoto de Lisboa: Ficar Diferente” organized by Helena Buescu, 2 and 3 November, 2005 (http://www.fl.ul.pt/centros_invst/comparat/antiores/actividadesanteriores.htm). The German conference was the annual meeting of the German Association for 18th Century Studies, (DGEJ), under the heading of “Das Erdbeben von Lissabon und der Katastrophendiskurs im 18. Jahrhundert,” and held at the University of Göttingen, 6 to 8 October, 2005 (<http://www.katastrophendiskurs.de/>).

3. Dossier 1755:
<http://dossiers.publico.pt/shownews.asp?id=1237411&idCanal=1543>.

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