



## Opinion Article

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# The Pre-Catastrophic Times, The Catastrophic Times, and The Cultural Heritage Conservation Theory

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## Introduction

I have received an enticing offer to prepare text for the "Opinion" section in Archaeology & Anthropology. I contemplated looking back at the XVII congress of Associazione internazionale mosaicisti contemporanei held in October 2022 in Ravenna, where I delivered presentation entitled *Estetica della crisi del Coronavirus e l'arte del mosaico*<sup>1</sup>. The other option was looking at the topic of intensifying catastrophism in relation to the field that aims to conserve (not only) art created in the past, i.e. cultural heritage conservation, rather than the aesthetic principles influencing the current creative arts. In the end, I decided for the second option, although the overall tone of the presentation delivered in Ravenna also resonates in this text. I am therefore returning to year 2005, when my paper entitled *The Extinction and Origination of Cultural Heritage Conservations with the subheading Philosophy of Cultural Heritage Conservation* was published. Back then, I worked as the advisor to the Minister of the Environment of the Czech Republic focusing on the issues of natural and cultural heritage and became the General Director of the National Heritage Institute in the Czech Republic for a certain period of time in 2006. While the world was highly complex already in 2005, the prevailing sentiment was characterised by civilisational optimism or at least realism, and except for few cases, there were no major eschatological moods arising from the catastrophism of the time, as these days, when the COVID-19 pandemic was followed by the war in Ukraine and the subsequent war in Israel, which also has a major potential for escalation.

Indeed, catastrophism of the contemporary era in its objective circumstances and subjective perception gives rise to the need

to answer once again even the most basic of all questions. If the anthropological character of human beings rises from the need to objectify oneself in relation to the outside world, which includes artistic expression, contemporary catastrophism adds the extra questions to this; what parts of man's self-objectification can be conserved over time and whether anything at all will be preserved. And what evidence do we have to support the notion that the worldwide system of cultural heritage conservation currently captures the most striking creations ever produced by the human mind, that the best artworks have not disappeared without a trace during wars and declines of civilisations, and that the current history of art is not trying to interpret coherently a fatefully broken line of artistic and cultural creations produced by the mankind over years. To sum this up, the example of the Viennese art historian Alois Riegel, who created a comprehensive cultural heritage conservation theory on the eve of World War I and the related collapse of the monarchy along the Danube river, shows that pre-catastrophic times intensify the pressure on creating cultural heritage conservation theory, which must be anthropology and anthropological theory of history in its core. As cultural heritage conservation theory asks certain highly complex questions, many people specialising in cultural heritage conservation reduce this field to purely practical, non-theoretical discipline: whether cultural heritage conservation considers the quality of the heritage as such; to what extent trivialisation of the cultural self-objectification of the mankind is unavoidable; whether cultural heritage in the sense of its conservation may ever be negentropic; and what role supernatural forces play in all this.

<sup>1</sup> HÁJEK, Tomáš *Estetica della crisi del Coronavirus e l'arte del mosaico*, in BERARDI, Rosetta (ed.), KLITSI, Artemis (ed.) *IL Mosaico: un'arte sacra fra culture e tecnologie (Mosaic: a sacred art in cultures and technologie)*. Ravenna: Edizioni del Girasole, 2022, p. 136-137

Year 2005 was the pre-catastrophic era in certain sense, as the rapid onset of the worldwide financial crisis in autumn 2008 was swiftly approaching and its vibrations were noticeable in the symptomatology of the time. As the 2005 text was written in the immediate pre-catastrophic era and in the height of the catastrophic era, we now have the chance to return to this paper, because the constellation is uniquely diachronic. I would therefore like to point out in this "Opinion" some of the key moments of the cultural heritage conservation theory I pointed out in my paper entitled *The Extinction and Origination of Cultural Heritage Conservations*. The following text therefore quotes my own description of the six key characteristics of cultural heritage conservation as I saw them then and still see them today, in particular with regard to the radical diachrony of cultural heritage conservation:

I. Working with the history of cultural heritage conservations involves endless attempts to fit something elusive within certain mental boundaries.

II. Cultural heritage conservation is a series of irreplicable actions of the human mind, which cannot unfold outside history and cannot exceed history, just as a protected building cannot avoid history, even if we were to invent a technology that would make protected buildings completely durable. Even completely durable and protected heritage can be destroyed by a revolution as the product of the history.

III. Cultural heritage conservation is a series of irreplicable and closed episodes. There is no One Cultural Heritage Conservation - it consists of series of independent cultural heritage conservations that appear and disappear over time as unique practical and philosophical expression of historicity of a man and the mankind. What's more, within these episodes, cultural heritage conservation is a series of radically dissimilar moments, i.e. historical singularities.

IV. History of cultural heritage conservation has nothing in common with evolution or progress. Both, progress and evolution are impossible due to the broken line and the episodic character of the history of cultural heritage conservation. All these episodes are equally important practical and philosophical expressions of the historicity of a man and the humankind.

V. If cultural heritage conservation is free of the "purification" by progress, the differences between cultural heritage conservation, antiques and collecting rarities are of rather minor importance.

VI. This gives us the outlook for cultural heritage conservation with future that cannot be scientifically predicted. Nothing can be ruled out: return to the so-called outdated forms of cultural heritage conservation, extensive shift of cultural heritage conservation from the state to the private sector, new topography of which heritage has value, and which has none.

We are now deep in the catastrophic time, which is extremely dangerous for the existence of all forms of cultural heritage. To borrow the words from my book, another episode of cultural heritage conservation may start and may not build on the previous episodes at all. Its characteristics cannot be predicted. I am certain that others attempted cultural heritage conservation theory during pre-catastrophic times as I did, and some of their theories are undoubtedly more elaborate with better empiric basis. However, the catastrophic time spanning the end of the first decade, the second decade and the beginning of the third decade of this millennium has provided a certain advantage. Without destroying us as the humankind directly, it has given us the time and historically based experience for the attempt to create (even during this catastrophic time and shortly after the last moment) cultural heritage conservation theory - which parts of the world's heritage to protect and how to do so during times when absolutely everything may be destroyed. We will not protect the world's cultural heritage during the catastrophic times by including new items on the UNESCO's cultural heritage list. On the contrary, this may be counterproductive in the cultural panic of the catastrophic time, as the mankind has changed and tourism focusing on cultural heritage produces greater danger for heritage than it did in the past. I would like to stress out once again that a man of the catastrophic time has changed significantly from the pre-catastrophic time. Therefore, the cultural heritage conservation theory in the catastrophic time must be mainly an anthropological theory of change of a man reflecting among others the consequences of the massive demographic growth of the world's population after World War II, potential disinhibiting effect of the internet on the world's population and the procrastination consequences of the spreading impact of social networks. The cultural heritage conservation theory created in catastrophic times therefore must be far more interdisciplinary than in the past and must support the notion that collapse of the civilisation is not unavoidable, but if it were to occur, the mankind is capable of starting anew.

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<sup>2</sup> HÁJEK, Tomáš *Zánik a vznik památkových péčí (Filozofie památkové péče)*. Praha: nakladatelství EPOCH, 2005. 197 p., p. 67-69