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Introduction

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Abstract This collectively written essay in four parts makes an original contribution to crisis research by exploring how crisis narratives structure *time* and *space*, that is, the ways ‘crisis’ as a framework, concept, rhetoric, affective, and discursive structure forms or taps into specific *chronotopes*. In our hyper-interconnected times, the simultaneous experience of many transversal crises—past and present, global and local, chronic and

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short-lived—is particularly acute. This simultaneity and transversality of crises invite rigorous theorization, critical responses, and finding new languages to speak to this complexity. Through Bakhtin’s notion of the *chronotope*, we broach questions of crisis, time, and space, as experienced, imagined, and represented across various contexts, including Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean. Chronotopes of crisis partake in complex constellations of meanings, discourses, and affective structures that call for interdisciplinary engagement. This book combines several disciplinary perspectives to consider how contemporary crises—economic, environmental, social, political, humanitarian—trigger memories of earlier narratives, traumas, or practices of resistance, and how they foster or foreclose visions of the future. Reading crisis through the chronotope, we also revisit the relation of *crisis* with *critique*, aiming to address problematic mobilizations of crisis today and discern future trajectories for thinking and living in and through crisis.

Keywords Crisis • Critique • Chronotope • Bakhtin • futures • Temporality

Crisis and *time* are a commonplace but uneasy pair. The temporal experiences that permeate the concept of *crisis* have been explored, among others, by conceptual historian Reinhart Koselleck, who famously argued that in (European) modernity, the concept of crisis grows into the “fundamental mode of interpreting historical time.” As such, it can capture and “generalize the modern experience to such an extent that ‘crisis’ becomes a permanent concept of ‘history’” (2006, 371). Crisis is often awaited and feared yet arrives unexpectedly. This arrival can make the impossible seem attainable and unsettle reified structures, but a state of disruption can also linger beyond forecasted time-frames and cause additional disorientation and damage to the most vulnerable. Announcing ‘crisis’ or claiming one’s being ‘in crisis’ situates the subject in time, and marks a temporal break caused by “singular events” or, in other cases, an experience that flows from prolonged “pervasive contexts” of crisis that involve “slow processes of deterioration, erosion and negative change” (Vigh 2008, 8–9). This situatedness of subjects ‘in’ crisis involves both temporal and spatial coordinates—in relation to past and future, and to other positionalities in the present, cutting across regions and biographies. Since crisis as a normative

category suggests a deviation from a perceived idea of normality or ‘good life,’ all crises are contrasted to ‘non-crisis’ times/spaces as well as ruptures of the past: a crisis is declared or experienced as such “in relation to how life is presumed better elsewhere and how life was better or could be better in other times” (Vigh 2008, 11). Even though such experiences of crisis are certainly not new, in our hyper-interconnected times, the simultaneous experience of many overlapping and transversal crises—past and present, global and local, with a variety of causes and durations—has become particularly acute. This simultaneity and transversality of crises as a contemporary global condition call for rigorous theorization, alongside ways of critically responding, orientating, and finding new languages to speak to this complexity.

The COVID-19 pandemic brings this transversality of different crises on a global level into sharp relief. Notwithstanding the challenge of reflecting on a crisis while we are still ‘in’ it, and thus “from the vantage point of its *unfinished experience*,” Étienne Balibar asks what it means to call this condition a ‘crisis,’ acknowledging that ‘crisis’ in this case does not mean the same to everyone and is not experienced in the same way by everyone (Balibar 2020, 11–12). This declared global crisis is marked by uneven local consequences and an “unequal distribution of vulnerability” (Butler 2020, 71) among different countries, regions, and population groups along age, profession, ethnicity, race, and gender lines. In this crisis that in many ways exacerbates “local and cultural differences” (Balibar 2020, 13), different kinds of crises coalesce or intersect, some of which preceded the emergence of the pandemic: a health crisis, an (incipient) economic crisis, a crisis of the human species, linked with the environmental crisis,¹ a crisis of governmentality and neoliberal capitalism, palpable in the failures of governments to contain the crisis and the dismantling of health care, social security, and social services by neoliberal capitalism that this crisis made painfully blatant (Balibar 2020, 18). The same crisis—or nexus of transversal crises—has also given rise to conflicting views about what this could mean for the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism: whether it will lead to its imminent collapse and to radical changes in society and in our relation to the planet, or to a fortification of the neoliberal system and of biopolitical governmentality and securitarianism. Even though COVID-19 is not the primary focus of this collection, the coalescence and intersection of different crises, the uneven consequences, conflicting interpretations, and divergent experiences that typify this ongoing crisis in many ways epitomize the complex questions this book seeks to address.

The term *crisis* (κρίσις) in ancient Greek denoted distinction, choice, decision, judgment, or critique (Koselleck 2006, 358–359). Crisis can signal a crucial moment of decision-making, a historical turning point, a periodic disruption, but also a perpetual, chronic state without prospect of resolution (Agamben 2013; Koselleck 2006). Experiences of crisis may involve a sense of disconnection and disorientation, collapsing linear temporality. Crisis can also function as an immobilizing framework for regions and people deemed to be in chronic crisis. It also often becomes an instrument of rule in neoliberal governmentality, legitimizing securitarian measures and states of emergency that limit people’s rights and access to public space (Butler and Athanasiou 2013; De Cauwer 2018). As such, crises can enhance the so-called TINA doctrine (“There is no alternative”)—a slogan that marks neoliberal politics since its global hegemony in the early 1990s and the collapse of Eastern-bloc communism. As a chronic framework of living, however, crisis need not always be a paralyzing condition that forecloses the imagination of alternative futures. Crisis-scapes can also trigger a “heightened awareness” of the present (Vigh 2008, 19; Bryant 2016) and foster critical or creative practices that question received notions of the past, generate different conceptions of history and futurity or lead to the shaping of alternative communities and infrastructures.

Disavowing an understanding of crisis as a descriptive term or objectively observable phenomenon, we thus approach crisis as a multivalent concept and an experiential and discursive framework that sets normative standards for valorizing certain narratives and foreclosing others (Roitman 2014; Boletsi et al. 2020). Crisis is also, significantly, a speech act, that is, a declaration that issues a judgment or diagnosis of the present fraught with implications for meaning-making, subject-formation, temporal and spatial orientation, infrastructures, and the livability and survival of people and/or the planet.

In this collectively written programmatic essay, we probe the many time-scapes, interweave the many expressions of crisis, and experiment with a variety of forms, styles, and genres to develop ways of thinking about the multiplicity and singularity of declared crises in general theoretical terms while linking these modes of thinking to specific, situated cases. This co-writing process included a large number of interdisciplinary scholars from different institutions, disciplinary backgrounds, and theoretical and experiential positions which all informed the mutual reviewing and re-writing process across the different stages, locations, and crises that

shape this volume: from working all together in Amsterdam in late 2019 during a workshop we organized under the same title as this book, through the seemingly sudden break that turned into the violent lingering of the COVID-19 pandemic in the months that followed and in the fraught ‘now.’ What remained, across these changing sites and modalities of ‘crisis,’ was the question of the role of this collaborative volume in addressing crises of our time.

In testing a variety of approaches and concepts, all sections draw upon the notion of the *chronotope*—the term Mikhail Bakhtin used for conceptualizing “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships” (Bakhtin 1981, 184), that is, the enmeshing of temporal and spatial experience into a common condition of a given era—as a guiding theoretical and analytical tool. Initially conceived as a tool for studying how historical time and space are articulated in literary genres, but also how time, space, and human characters within novels take shape in relation to each other, the chronotope is, in Bakhtin’s words, where “the knots of narrative are tied and untied” and where “the meaning that shapes narrative” lies (Bakhtin 1981, 187). By approaching crises through the notion of the chronotope, we draw attention to the narrative frameworks that structure accounts of crisis and the way these imply specific configurations of time and space. Mobilizing the notion of the chronotope also compels us to not lose sight of the historical situatedness of *crises* as we engage in theoretical ruminations about *crisis*: in other words, it forces us to address the multiplicity, heterogeneity, historicity, and contextual specificity of crises (in the plural) as we reflect on crisis (in the singular), constantly balancing our thoughts between the abstract and the specific, the singular and the plural. For Bakhtin, “[a]ll the novel’s abstract elements—philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect—gravitate toward the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood” (Bakhtin 1981, 187). “Without such temporal-spatial expression,” Bakhtin adds, “even abstract thought is impossible. Consequently, every entry into the sphere of meanings is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope” (258). Along these lines, abstract thought on crisis can only take “flesh and blood” through specific “temporal-spatial” configurations that produce meanings and affects.

Exploring chronotopic configurations in frameworks of crisis also allows us to address processes of subject-formation through crises, that is, the ways subjects are biopolitically produced, managed, and situated in crisis-scapes, as well as the ways they respond to, unsettle, and disorient

these configurations by imagining alternative, counter-hegemonic chronotopes.² In short, by mobilizing the chronotope as a theoretical tool, we can address the genres, forms, and grammars through which crises are narrativized; the temporal-spatial relations and notions of subjectivity generated through these narrativizations; and how these narrativizations converse with the historical conditions in which they appear or to which they allude. By exploring crises as chronotopes, we also revisit the relation of *crisis* with its cognate, *critique*, in order to ask which narrative structures, genres, grammars, vocabularies, and practices can effectively counter problematic mobilizations of crisis-rhetoric today and contribute to shaping counter-hegemonic chronotopic structures. Looking at crisis through chronotopes also entails an approach to crises as *frameworks* or *contexts* (Vigh 2008) rather than temporary deviations from a (normalized) state: an idea that we unpack in Chapter Two of our book, dedicated to the notion of ‘chronic crisis.’ Here, we follow Vigh’s viewing of crisis “as a terrain of action and meaning” which entails “depart[ing] from our regular understanding of crisis and trauma as momentary and particularised phenomena and mov[ing] toward an understanding of critical states as pervasive contexts rather than singular events” (2008, 8).

At the core of our inquiry in this book is the question of how ‘crisis’ as a framework, concept, rhetoric, affective, or discursive structure forms or taps into specific time-space constellations. This inquiry brings into productive tension and dialogue perspectives in literary and cultural studies, anthropology, philosophy, memory studies, and the environmental humanities. In Chapter Two, we take the chronicity of crisis as a starting point to interrogate how time-scapes of disruption and normalcy fade into one another. As crisis becomes protracted or permanent, its potentiality as a moment of change and critique can be subverted and elicit instead experiences of paralysis. Chronicity calls for new skills and narratives with which the social and temporal dynamics of crisis may be navigated, and calls into question how and when the chronic is experienced and narrated as crisis. From this, we then move in Chapter Three to a consideration of the grammars of crisis and their theoretical implications—grammatical structures (broadly understood) that permeate crisis-rhetoric as well as grammars that shape alternative chronotopic constellations. In-between the different grammatical categories we braid together fictional interjections, through which ghostly, suppressed voices haunt the conceptual construct of Grammar. The grammar of the middle voice, with which this part concludes, forms a link to the following part on chronotopes of memory:

in-between the passive and the active and defying dualisms, the middle voice echoes those strategies of ‘looking sideways’ that Chapter Four traces—acts of searching for and mapping a path aside from the magistral road of utopia/dystopia as a framework of addressing crises. The overall reflection in this chapter on the *chronotopes of memory* generates an inquiry into the infrastructures that (re)emerge or reconfigure themselves through acts of recall in response to crisis: what are the political workings of such infrastructures, whose agendas do they serve? What ways of being and thinking in crisis do these figures enable? And what do they foreclose? From memory practices that reshape and produce chronotopes to epistemic reconfiguration, Chapter Five centers on the modes of knowledge and analysis, that allow us to adequately apprehend and respond to the present of pathos. Concerned with the ways in which ideological over-determination acts as analytical foreclosure, which blocks an adequate understanding of crisis and of the causality governing its manifestation, the section calls us to think crisis otherwise. To this end, the section proposes the notion of ‘super-learning’ which, building on Spinoza’s typology of knowledge, seeks to provide a more adequate analytic of crisis, defamiliarize the ways of ‘knowing time,’ working against the dominant ways in which time and temporality of crises are understood, measured, or approached.

Interrogating different scholarly fields in this book, the interpretative frames they offer, and the questions they raise, necessarily “require[s] an awareness of the depths of our multiple entanglements” (Gillespie and Lopez 2019, 13). Yet crisis, similarly to grief as theorized by Gillespie and Lopez et al. (2019), is not just a metaphor, a category one can simply ‘interrogate.’ Across its many timelines and manifestations, crisis is a “politicized embodied and affective experience” (Gillespie and Lopez 2019, 13) that reroutes and saturates ways of thinking and living in and through crisis-scapes, not least of those trying to grapple with it in scholarly terms while living through crisis moments. Seen in this light, the collaborative and formally heterogeneous form of this text in four chapters is indeed an *essay* (from *essai*—attempt, trial in French) at creating a generative and shared polyphonic space, one that embodies the differentiated experiences and meanings of crisis. Such a scholarly space of thinking with crisis/crises is thus necessarily an unfinished one, radically pushing against the foreclosure and silencing of analytical determinism. “Unfinishedness,” as Biehl and Locke posit, “is a feature as generative to art and knowledge production as it is to living” (Biehl and Locke 2017, x).

This polyphonic unfinishedness is at the very heart of trying to write with/of crisis. First, such unfinishedness aims to make audible the different ways of communicating crises without privileging one disciplinary language and method over another. Rather, as it is visible in the varying theoretical genealogies, scales of reference, and abstraction across these pieces, thinking with the chronotope allows us to translate the different notions of crisis but still make clear that these are *different* perspectives, and so are the form and style of each contributing piece. Rather than fitting the heterogeneous languages of each chapter into a unified theoretical frame, this book creates a dialogic space for the current heteroglossia of crisis, in which the uniquely inflected languages resonate with each other. “[L]ike mirrors that face each other, each reflecting in its own way a piece, a tiny corner of the world” this polyphonic structure, we hope, can “force us to guess at and grasp for a world behind their mutually reflecting aspects that is broader, more multi-leveled, containing more and varied horizons than would be available to a single language or a single mirror” (Bakhtin 1981, 414–415).

The heterogeneous theoretical vocabularies, disciplinary approaches, and writing styles—from the scholarly to the literary—accommodated in this book make a case for the necessity of interdisciplinary and multi-genre approaches to the complex crises-scapes in our globalized present. Yet they also point to the necessity and impossibility of ‘translating’ one crisis into another and to the task of critique as an (always imperfect) translation—an attempt, as Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood put it, “to map incommensurable world views without seeking to reconcile them” and trace how “they constitute, inflect, and even suffuse one another without projecting a broader dialectical unity to which they ultimately tend” (2009, xvi). If the word *critique* partly converges with *crisis* in their common origin in the Greek verb *krino* (κρίνω)—“to separate,” “decide,” “judge,” “fight,” “accuse” (Asad 2009, 48; Koselleck 1988)—in our book the kind of *judgment* that critique (just like crisis) involves does not issue from a unified, all-encompassing, universal framework but, to speak with Butler, emerges “at the very site of conflict, clash, divergence, overlapping” between different frameworks. “[S]uch judgment,” then, requires “a practice of cultural translation” (Butler 2009, 104). Resisting approaches to crisis that impose singular explanatory frameworks, we seek to address the transversality of crises through varied forms of thinking *and* writing: we thereby experiment with modes of critique that engage in imperfect translations among declared crises, their

global dimensions and local manifestations. Our understanding of critique—especially when it involves interpreting crises that are still unfolding and in which we are multiply albeit differently and unevenly implicated—takes heed, to use Balibar’s words,³ of “the contradictory determinations which can be observed simultaneously” (2020, 13).

In her reflection on writing crisis and catastrophe, informed by the events of Chernobyl and 9/11, and by attempts to devise their meaning and significance as quickly as possible, Svetlana Alexievich cautions us: “Words and language are smaller than the event ... but the most important lesson that we needed to learn from that event took more time to emerge” (Alexievich 2006, n.pag.). Following her advice, we hope that the exploratory form that we chose for this book, where one can speak for half a page and the other for two in a non-hierarchical manner, will allow us to take the time and space to consider the possible directions for further theorizations of crises beyond set frameworks, critical languages or contexts. The role of this volume in addressing crises of our time is to offer a heterogeneous space of respite, a space for critical thought and life, away from the hyperbole and cacophony of ideological overdetermination of the ‘new normal,’ the permanent state of exception. These generative, open-ended, and critical theorizations can too, as is our hope, help us stretch our “imaginative horizons” (Crapanzano 2004) and conceive of new, and unexpected, ways of thinking and being with others, through and beyond crisis time-scapes.

Though this project stems from discussions that began a few years ago and developed during the workshop “(Un)timely Crises: Chronotopes and Critique” that took place at the University of Amsterdam in October 2019, finalizing the book in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak has brought about additional experiences, reflections, and urgency to critically address the multiple intersecting crises that run through this pandemic. As interpretations of this multilayered crisis—involving an array of chronic economic, ecological and social conditions that made the current pandemic possible—multiply and range from overly optimistic (capitalism pushed to the edge) to downright pessimistic (exacerbated inequalities), the only clarity is the shared state of disorientation. Just like any articulation of a singular crisis, this complex structure can be envisioned as a chronotope involving hegemonic frames as well as anti-hegemonic potentialities. Reading crisis through the chronotope, as we hope to demonstrate, provides us with a critical optic to comprehend nodal points of crises and discern future trajectories for thinking and living in and through crisis.

NOTES

1. Many have rejected an understanding of the emergence and spreading of the COVID-19 virus as a ‘fact of nature,’ viewing it instead as a symptom of ongoing environmental destruction and linking it with ecological crisis (e.g., Balibar 2020; Löwy 2020; Hansen 2020, and many others).
2. The chronotope did not only allow Bakhtin to explore how texts relate to their historical, social, political contexts, but also to ask how notions of subjectivity emerge at specific times and places (Vice 1997, 201).
3. Balibar discusses in this case approaches to the COVID-19 crisis (2020).

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