

Elizabeth Kovach, Ansgar Nünning, Imke Polland (Eds.)

## Literature and Crises:

Conceptual Explorations and Literary Negotiations

Ansgar Nünning und Vera Nünning (Hg.)

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

‘Crisis’ is one of the most commonly used concepts in discussions of the current state of our cultures and societies. While states of emergency and crises of all sorts seem to abound in current media discourses, analyses of literary and cultural negotiations of crises are still few and far between. It is all the more surprising that literary and cultural studies scholars have not yet fully explored the interfaces of the concepts of ‘literature’ and ‘crises’ when taking into account the fact that modernity has been shaped by overthrows in the form of military conflicts and intellectual re-negotiations of norms and ideologies, which have been described, narrated and remembered as crises.

In light of the manifold and diverse literary negotiations of crises, which range from a more descriptive understanding of crisis understood as a marker for chaos, catastrophe or disaster and an incentive for social change to a vague meaning of a metaphor that obscures rather than lays bare the origins and problems related to a specific crisis, event, or situation, this volume sets out to shed further light on theorizations and exemplary analyses of the various relationships between literature and crises (economic, environmental, political, social, cultural, humanitarian or crises of identity, norms, and values). Its chapters offer explorations of the nexus between crisis and literature from various theoretical perspectives, pertaining to a broad range of historical contexts and encompassing a variety of textual genres (from plays and autobiography to cinema and blogs). The four sections move from the historical (early modern contexts) to the contemporary (21st-century contexts), through the socio-political (20th-century contexts) and the personal (crises of the mind).

This volume emerged from the work of the European PhDnet Literary and Cultural Studies (PhDnet) based at Justus Liebig University, Giessen, and Giessen University’s International PhD Programme “Literary and Cultural Studies” (IPP). In October 2016, both international doctoral programs jointly organized the final conference concluding the three-year curriculum of the third cycle of the PhDnet. At this conference, international PhD students, postdocs, and university professors gathered to discuss the fascinating interfaces between literature and crises and thus pave the way for the projected volume.

Publishing the results of these discussions would not have been possible without substantial support. We give our heartfelt thanks to a wonderful team, without whose dedication this book would not exist – especially Dr. Nora Berning, who was in charge of organizing the conference and thus lay the foundations for this volume. We thank the IPP and PhDnet assistants, Mareike Zapp, Max Bergmann, and Laura Lizarazo, who took on a lion’s share of work in repeatedly and attentively checking the articles and bibliographies. Thank you to Melanie Grunt Suárez and Franziska Eick for their assistance with the formatting and compilation of the manuscript and to Kate Oden for her assistance with proofreading. Finally, we would like to extend our thanks to the contributors to this volume, whose thorough work answered our questions on conceptualizing, theorizing, exemplifying, and analyzing the interfaces between literature and crises.

*Giessen, November 2017*

*Elizabeth Kovach, Ansgar Nünning, and Imke Polland*



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# WHERE LITERATURE AND CRISES MEET: COMING TO TERMS WITH TWO COMPLEX CONCEPTS AND THEIR INTERFACES

ELIZABETH KOVACH, ANSGAR NÜNNING, IMKE POLLAND

## 1. Literature and Crises: Conceptual Explorations and Literary Negotiations

Whether regarding refugees or racial divides, the economy or the environment, identity or the very modes of creative expression that we have at our disposal, our worlds are marked by perpetual crises. The ubiquity of crisis in today's media culture alone serves to show that crisis has become one of the most prevalent terms for describing the current states of our cultures, economies, ecologies, politics, and societies. In addition to its specific and technical uses in the fields of economics, medicine, and psychology, the metaphorical concept of crisis has most prominently been used in media discourses to describe states of uncertainty that are likely to have harmful or negative outcomes. Although this focus on crisis has seen a significant rise during the last decade, modernity has witnessed more economic, political, and social crises, including military conflicts, than anyone would care to remember. The term 'crisis' can thus be understood both as a way of classifying and describing particular situations or scenarios that have a deep impact on societies, and as a label that is performative in the sense that it evokes a sense of danger, disaster, and impending doom.

In consideration of these two facets of the term, scholars of literature and culture can analyze literary works and other cultural artifacts in terms of the ways in which states of crisis are evoked, articulated, and how these expressions of crisis shed light on the meaning and impact of crisis as such. Furthermore, studying the variety of literary and cultural negotiations of crises also serves to shed light on developments within literary and cultural forms and genres. Key questions pertaining to this approach include: What does literature add to the discourse about certain crises or how does it reshape them? Can literature foreshadow or even prompt oncoming crises – for instance, by picking up current turbulences, irritations, conflicts, or by discussing former crises and how they played out? To what extent do generic changes (changes in form, mode, and style of writing) reflect and challenge crisis discourses?

Despite the sheer number of alarming crises that characterize the present and the ubiquity of crisis metaphors in our contemporary media culture, the topic of crisis has received a modest amount of direct attention from scholars of literature, narrative, and rhetoric. Notwithstanding a number of interesting publications since 2000 (cf. Bullivant/Spies 2001; Grunwald/Pfister 2007; Meiner/Veel 2012; Mergel 2012; Meyer/Patzel-Mattern/Schenk 2013), the topic of crisis begs for more attention in the studies of literature and culture. This volume responds to this demand, offering a range of con-

tributions that explore the nexus between crisis and literature from various theoretical perspectives, pertaining to a broad range of historical contexts, and encompassing a variety of textual genres (from plays and autobiography to cinema and blogs). Beginning with historical crises of early modernity and their cultural representations, proceeding with socio-political crises of the 20th century and the crises of representation they engendered, lending special attention to narrations of crises of the mind, and ending with a substantial section on negotiations of 21st-century crises, this collection of essays by young and established scholars in the fields of literary and cultural studies provides a range of perspectives on crises in (and of) literary and cultural expression. Moving from the historical to the contemporary, through the socio-political and the personal, our goal has been to capture some of the complex and myriad ways in which literature and crises meet.

In addition to regarding its cultural ubiquity, the study of crises is particularly interesting for literary and cultural studies, because crises can be understood as challenges to hegemonic epistemologies and prevailing forms of life. Epistemological crises (cf. MacIntyre 2013 [1981]) demonstrate the validity of Jay Griffiths's observation that "the Western way of knowing has denied validity to every mind save its own" (2015 [2007]: 16): "The West, though, has long operated an intellectual apartheid, arrogantly certain that its own expertise is the only knowledge worth the name: it cannot manage to respect other human societies' epistemologies, let alone accept that an animal can think" (ibid.: 72). Bearing in mind that "[t]here are extinctions, too, of ways of knowing" (ibid.: 77), we suggest that the study of epistemological crises offers a chance to retrieve latent ways of knowing and living.

Needless to say, explorations of the interfaces between literature and crisis can go in many directions. To provide some conceptual and theoretical orientation points for navigating this topic of research, the proceeding sections of this introduction offer perspectives that we find are helpful for coming to terms with these two concepts and their junctures. As we will try to show in section two, one way of coming to terms with crises is to explore their metaphorical implications and to study the narratives that the metaphor of crisis generates. Heeding David Herman's wise words that "no one area of study can come to terms with the multidimensional complexity of narrative worldmaking" (Herman 2011: ix), we will argue that the topic of literature and crises is both a transdisciplinary challenge and a chance for the study of literature and culture. Section three will attempt to reframe crises as cultural narratives for the study of literature and culture, delineating a conceptual framework for the chapters in the following sections of this volume. Proceeding from the assumption that crises can best be understood as cultural narratives, we will try to show that crises can be conceptualized as particular kinds of (non-)events and as periods of enhanced latency.<sup>1</sup> In section four, we will make an attempt to systematically gauge the interfaces between literature and

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<sup>1</sup> Sections 2 and 3 of this introduction are largely based on a condensed version of ideas and arguments developed in earlier essays on the topic of crises (cf. Nünning 2009, 2012, 2015).

crises. More specifically, we will propose five different ways in which these two terms can be fruitfully interlinked. Special focus will be placed on the notion of epistemological crises as a challenge and chance for literary studies. In addition to a summary of the volume's sections and contributions, the final section will explore the functions that literary representations, negotiations, and reinterpretations of crises can fulfil and what their latent (and largely untapped) potential for our "cultural ecology" could be (cf. Zapf 2016).

## 2. Metaphor, (Mini-)Narrative, and Way of Worldmaking: Conceptualizing Crisis in Semiotic Terms for Literary and Cultural Studies

To come to terms with the two key concepts of this volume, we should bear in mind that it is usually the material manifestation of culture (and, to a lesser degree, its social dimension) that constitutes our object of study, while cognitive, or symbolic, dimensions defy direct observation. Mentalities, values and norms, cognitive processes, and affects are largely latent dispositions that can only be analyzed when they manifest themselves in texts and other cultural artifacts. When these or other aspects of culture's mental dimension are projected onto the screen of symbolic practices and products and thus reflected in the material or social dimension, it becomes possible to grasp and analyze them methodologically.

Let us therefore first turn our attention to the question of how we can conceptualize crisis in semiotic terms for the study of literature and culture. Our media landscape creates such a multitude of crises that one can justly speak of 'crisis inflation' and a media society obsessed with crises of all kinds. The medial proliferation of perpetually new crises is not, however, comprised of neutral and objective status reports but rather attributions and diagnoses that are perspective-bound and media-dependent. These attributions and diagnoses are, in turn, based upon modes of perception specific to the historical moment and often present crises as the counterparts to the uninteresting normality of everyday situations. In addition, as the essayist, novelist, and philosopher Alain de Botton puts it, the news "fails to disclose that it does not merely report on the world, but is instead constantly at work crafting a new planet in our minds in line with its own often highly distinctive priorities" (2014: 11). One does not have to be a radical constructivist to agree that the media's construction of crises has contributed to turning certain situations and stories into media events, thus crafting new worlds in our minds that consist largely of crises that take on cultural lives of their own. Although nobody living in the 21st century would be likely to deny that talking about events or situations in terms of crises is a way of referring to developments in the real world, crises can nonetheless best be conceptualized as metaphors – that is, as forms of figurative knowledge, mininarrations, and "ways of worldmaking," to adopt Nelson Goodman's felicitous term (cf. 1992 [1978]).

Crises are not simply givens that exist ‘out there’ in the real world. On the contrary, they result from signifying practices. When people deem a particular situation to be one of crisis, they resort to metaphors (cf. Nünning 2009). To better understand discourses of crisis, it is thus important to understand the meaning and cultural functions of metaphors. In the preface to his seminal encyclopedia of philosophical metaphors, the editor Ralf Konersmann provides a useful definition: “Metaphors are narratives that mask themselves as a single word” (2008: 17, translation ours).<sup>2</sup> The subtitle of the encyclopedia’s preface, “Figurative Knowledge,” sheds light on another key aspect of metaphors: they generate knowledge, albeit of a figurative kind. Konersmann is, of course, neither the only nor the first scholar to draw attention to the fact that metaphors can be conceived of as condensed narratives and producers of special kinds of knowledge. Philip Eubanks, for instance, has argued that metaphors project “mininarrations” (1999: 437), and other theorists have also acknowledged the cognitive and knowledge-creating potential of metaphors (cf. Lakoff/Johnson 1980).

The metaphors of crises, as producers of knowledge, provide fascinating case studies for exploring how metaphors not only shape the prevailing views of a culture but are also shaped by the cultures and theories from which they originate (cf. Grabes/Nünning/Baumbach 2009). On the one hand, metaphors project structures and emotions onto cultural phenomena, which defy direct observation and are thus made graspable via metaphor. In doing so, they play central roles in shaping both culture and theory. On the other hand, metaphors are also shaped by everyday cultural notions and theories. The metaphor of crisis, for instance, tends to evoke a wide range of affective (cf. Kövecses 2000), cognitive, and ideological implications over and beyond the denotative meaning of the term (cf. Nünning 2009, 2012, 2015).

Indeed, metaphors are not only “the understanding of something in one conceptual domain [...] by conceptual projection from something in a different conceptual domain” (Turner/Fauconnier 1999: 403), but they also act as epistemological, conceptual, and cultural tools that are imbued with a wide range of cognitive, emotional, and ideological connotations. In a thorough linguistic exploration of the metaphors of crisis and the many compounds that have emerged around this metaphor, Renate Bebermeyer sheds light on the cognitive processes involved:

familiarization to the omnipresence of the verbal crisis creates a certain ‘consensus-background’ in front of which the crisis-commonplace is accepted without criticism [...]. [E]verybody can have their own thoughts about crises and search the available crisis options for something appropriate: The chosen crisis. (1981: 348)

More often than not, we readily accept “the chosen crisis” for the simple reason that we do not really understand its complicated background, or are simply not that interested in the economic, financial, or political details. The language of crisis is both common and catchy. In the media, it functions as a cipher or abbreviation that attracts

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<sup>2</sup> “Metaphern sind Erzählungen, die sich als Einzelwort maskieren” (Konersmann 2008: 17). All subsequent translations indicated by footnote of the original are ours.