

The Crisis Work

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The configurations of 3 are very much more complex than the configurations of 2. There are 2 ways in which 2 items can be combined (but really 1, since the 2 ways are exactly symmetrical), but 6, or 3 factorial, $3 \times 2 \times 1$ ways in which 3 items, like Art, Money and Crisis can be combined. Each of the elements may be imagined as the mediation of the others – art might be thought of as the mediation of money and crisis, money as the mediation of art and crisis. Or we might change that metaphor, and imagine the mediator as a kind of interruptor, diagonal distraction, or noise on the line – something that impedes rather than enables communication between two terms. There will be plenty that we think we know, or at least know we think, about art and money and the relations between them, ways in which art can induce us to think about money, for example, and money can make certain things in art and certain kinds of thinking about art possible.

But what of crisis? What are we to make of crisis, what can crisis make happen, and hold at bay?

Crisis is related to Greek *krinein*, to judge, determine, or decide. In Greek, *krisis* could mean both the act of judging and the actual judgement – the event or issue of the judgement – to which it leads. As such, it is first cousin to words like *criticism* and *critique*. This makes phrases like ‘the crisis of criticism’, which used to abound in literary and cultural publishing, immaculately tautological – all criticism is both the effect and effecting of a kind of crisis. Medicine preserves the link between crisis and the idea of a decisive turning point: to be in a ‘critical condition’ is not to disapprove of your treatment plan or consultant’s bedside manner, but to be at the point at which something will be decided. The earliest citation given by the OED for crisis used in this sense, from a medical text book of 1543, tells us baldly that ‘Crisis sygnifieth iudgement’ (Vigo 1543, sig Z4v). The judgement in question is a judgement that we are not necessarily going to be able or called upon to make, or may be as Larkin calls it, ‘what something hidden from us chose’ (Larkin 1988, 153). In a medical crisis it is often the body that will make its own judgement on itself. The word crisis has also been used to mean a sign, symptom or determining feature, even a *criterion*, which shares its Greek root. A seventeenth-century entomologist uses the word in this way in commenting that the beauty and vigour of certain flies is ‘a Crysis of their youth, not their idleness’ (Purchas 1657, 12).

The time of crisis is an exceptional time, a time of change, renewal, revolution or even revelation – the time not of *chronos*, the hickory-dickory-dock of one thing coming after another, but of *kairos*, that which breaks into or breaks out in ordinary clock or calendar time. Michel Serres proposes in his book *Temps des crises* that crisis must accordingly always imply a breakthrough into the absolutely new and irrevocable: ‘If we are really going through a crisis, in the strong medical sense of the term, then a return backwards is no good. The terms “stimulus” or “reform” are irrelevant. If we are really dealing with a crisis then no “recovery” is possible’ (Serres 2015, xii). So a crisis always in a sense is a matter of life and death, a choice between the life of the new and the death of the old. As such, it may seem exhausting, painful, stressful, and so in almost all cases to be averted or avoided.

And yet much of modern art, if not also of modern life, seems to suffer under a kind of deficit or deferral of crisis. ‘Should I, after tea and cakes and ices’ havers Eliot’s Prufrock, ‘Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?’ (Eliot 1969, 15). This might suggest that another view of crisis might be in hand. What if the condition of crisis were not a catastrophic or redemptive eruption, but could become a permanent possibility and even a permanent necessity? What if *kairos* could become chronic, and the event of crisis become

frequentative? What if the necessity might arise to manufacture, monitor and maintain crisis? Such a view might be assisted by Heiner Mühlmann's proposal about Maximal Stress Cooperation (Mühlmann 1996, 28-42). Put at its simplest, this means that dangerous and menacing events or periods are powerfully and paradoxically cohering. Or, as Peter Sloterdijk puts it, human beings 'are always "worked up" or agitated about something or other – be it catastrophes, enemy states, crimes, or scandals – they constantly keep revolving the thematic material that they use to communicate internally about their situation, or rather, about their immune status or stress-status' (Sloterdijk 2006, 6). This is a good thing, as long as the cooperation produced by the stimulus of crisis does not itself result in the intensification of crisis – as the response to 9-11 might seem to suggest it can. By constantly renewing and revolving these stress themes 'a group takes its own fever temperature; and through its fever, it generates its own operative unity as an endogenously closed context of agitation' (Sloterdijk 2006, 6).

This may concern the relations between art and money more nearly than we might think, and not in the banal sense that art can be a form of reflection on such things – or even a resistance to them – or in the even more banal, if undoubtedly powerful sense that art is annoyingly subject to material pressures like the availability or not of money. The possibility I am mooting is that art, which, like academic communication in general, may have become more or less completely absorbed into the contemporary ecology of media, is one of the most important and versatile subsystems on which we rely to produce and prolong crisis at a manageable level. If there is a theory of such a practice, or a practice of such a theory, one would surely be able to point to a version of it in the state of permanent excitation of art, the state of permanent excitation which art actually and definitionally is, which has taught us, more powerfully than any other activity, that only unrelenting crisis can validate its operations or our interest. So, if crisis is a kind of judgement, we may well suspect that the work of judgement reciprocally requires, profits from, and perhaps itself precipitates and prolongs conditions of crisis, for example in the project of radicalisation, that is the radiation of new forms and possibilities of radicality at every moment.

One obvious objection to this view might be that, if art is just playing at crisis, then it's not crisis, but just play. But crisis-play is perhaps precisely what immunity is – and perhaps crisis-control what, in the animal world at least, play is and is for. Playing is rehearsing, anticipating crisis in order to head it off. The slogan employed by the Commercial Union insurance company used to be 'We won't make a drama out of a crisis'. But a drama is precisely the way in which crisis is kept in an inflamed but subcritical condition. The kind of dramatisation produced by the artist and other media operatives is surely an important way in which crisis is managed and self-monitored, that is to say, maintained at optimal levels of stressory coherence-induction.

In his book *Rage and Time*, Peter Sloterdijk has drawn on Mühlmann's sociobiological arguments regarding the fundamental role in culture formation of Maximal Stress Cooperation to analyse the ways in which states, religions and political movements capitalise anger. The originality of his argument is in the link he makes between rage and temporality. For the strength of rage, which may be defined as the passionate inability to tolerate delay, is also its weakness, since rage is so apt to squander itself, in incandescent but ultimately ineffective effusion. In order to maximise its powers, rage must be concentrated, agglomerated, saved up and eked out. In the process, rage engenders narrative, by becoming revenge, and the ever-lengthening interval between offence and vengeance produces history. Subjected in this way to time, rage gives to time its very temper and tonality. As 'a vector that creates a tension between then, now, and later' (Sloterdijk 2010, 60), the desire for revenge is the most perfected form of the human sense of historical project.

But there is an economic as well as a temporal dimension to rage. And, given that the name we customarily give to the complex system of exchanges between time and economics is capitalism, Sloterdijk would have us think, not just in terms of a rage against the machine of

capitalism, but also of a veritable capitalist machinery of rage. He makes out a religious prehistory for this in the Judaic notion of the wrathful God, seeing the capacity of Judaism to defer yet nurture revenge for its wrongs as confirming Israel as 'the most important export nation for age-manufacturing systems' (Sloterdijk 2010, 91). Its most important trading partner is Christianity, the eschatology of which Sloterdijk reads as a system for maintaining through history 'a transcendent archive of rage' (Sloterdijk 2010, 97) which will be made good only on the Day of Judgement. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought about a secular diversification of this system, which had previously never advanced far beyond the primitive accumulations of the treasure-house or savings bank, into an ever more complex and intricately administered market of rage accounting and transaction.

Surely we can see crisis as forming a related or partly subsidiary system. We fear crisis, but need crisis to maintain fear at vitalising levels. We should recognise that the production, processing and diversification of themes of stress and crisis has become as important to mediated society as goods, services or money. Sloterdijk argues that

A constant, varying intense flow of stress topics must ensure the synchronisation of consciousnesses in order to integrate the respective population into a community of concern and excitation that regenerates from day to day. That is why modern information media are simply indispensable for the creation of coherence in national and continental stress communes. They alone are capable of binding together the diverging collectives with counter-tensions using a constant flow of irritant topics...The maintenance of the feeling of social cohesion among the shareholders...can only follow through chronic, symbolically produced stress. The larger the collective, the stronger the stress forces need to be that counteract the disintegration of the uncollectable collective into a patchwork of introverted clans and enclaves. As long as a collective can work itself up into a rage over the notion of doing away with itself, it has passed its vitality test. It does what healthy collectives do best, namely getting worked up; and in doing so, it proves what it wants to prove: that it reaches its optimum under stress. (Sloterdijk 2016, 7-8)

The history of modern financial institutions is a history of entanglement and accommodation between money and symbolic media. This entanglement is itself routinely and reliably productive of tension and crisis, since the crisis of the sign induced by the fitful fevering of share-prices can so easily and predictably become a matter of life and death. But the complex arrangements of contemporary finance mean that stress and crisis themselves are capitalised, that they have prices, stocks, outlays, risks, returns, losses, debts, discounts and dividends.

The work of art and the world of art, along with their accessory structures of explication and distribution, are part of a huge and ever-more densely interconnected and reticulated work of affect-symbolic engineering and administration, designed in large part to keep crisis-awareness and response at workable levels, thereby helping to stave off the crisis of crisis-recession. Along with politicians, academics, archbishops and other media functionaries, artists are the managers of crisis services and instruments in this symbolic economy of excitements, investments, opportunities and anxieties. I do not mean to snicker or, for reasons that should be painfully obvious, 'critique' this crisis-work, that we might do well to think of on the analogy of the Freudian dream-work, or joke-work. Crisis really does require managers and management, not just to guard against the possibility that this time the crisis might really sweep us away, but also to maintain crisis-liquidity, making sure the crisis account on which our collectivity depends is never overdrawn. No more reliable carrier or vehicle of this capitalisation of crisis can be imagined than the work of underwriting and capitalising the commanding fantasy of capital-C Capitalism itself. Nobody should imagine that to speak of fantasy makes the crisis it deals with and deals out merely imaginary; the work of fantasy, like the Freudian dream-work, is exacting and exhausting and in its strange

way honorable labour. We all have our part to play, not so much in imagining crisis, or producing imaginary crisis, or (least plausible of all), enlisting imagination as our salvation from crisis, as in keeping the crisis imaginary working at full capacity.

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