

*Criticism, Crisis, and Contemporary
Narrative: Textual Horizons in an Age of
Global Risk.*

Edited by Paul Crosthwaite

Oxon: Routledge, 2011
(ISBN: 978-0-415-87949-1). 226pp.

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The publication of this collection of essays, themed by crises, comes at a time when the act of criticism itself is in crisis. Editor Paul Crosthwaite argues that two things are striking about the panorama of contemporary crises: their diversity (financial, economic, environmental, geopolitical, terrorist, public health) and their global status. It is the conviction of this book that these crises require a wide variety of critical approaches, provided by twelve authors who attempt to highlight what insights literary and cultural criticism can offer to 'the contemporary climate of crisis' (p.4).

At a time when cultural criticism's death has been proposed (Eagleton, 2010; McDonald, 2007), *Criticism, Crisis, and Contemporary Narrative* seemingly does little to lift spirits. Its dark subject matter moves from risk narratives, pandemics and ecological disasters, to financial meltdown and terrorism. Yet, ironically, the works within serve to inspire hope in the discourse of critical writing through vigorous analyses of crisis narratives. These may be 'real' in the form of economic collapse or 'imagined' as in impending Armageddon, from nuclear weapons to ecological catastrophes. Rebecca Giggs expertly writes about the latter in the context of the

uncanny and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) in the concluding section.

In his introduction Crosthwaite states that criticism and crisis are etymologically linked by the Greek word *krinein* (to separate, to judge, to decide). He reminds us of Paul de Man's (1983) argument that the link between the two terms is necessary in order for criticism to progress. Crosthwaite interprets this literally by giving the example of the new field of ecocriticism and its inability to exist without 'the background of human pollution of the environment and resulting climate change' (p.3). It is by this token that this entire collection could not exist without moments of crises and their representations in arts and culture.

Having posited that crises are essential to the progression of criticism, the work implies the importance of its own existence. Crises need criticism and vice-versa. It is an astute collection in which one is as likely to encounter as much continuity as diversity. Ulrich Beck, Jacques Derrida, Martin Heidegger and others are referred to across a collection that houses topics as varied as South African science fiction, a James Bond film, nanotechnology, market traders and influenza.

Of the twelve essays, most require of the reader a detailed interest in current affairs as much as cultural criticism; others demand specialist knowledge. Examples of the former are Molly Wallace's work on the imagined nuclear apocalypse or Penelope Ironstone-Catterall's analysis of the illogical pandemic narrative of certainty in A/H1N1 (bird flu) in moments when all scientific fact points to uncertainty. Others require more considered approaches and familiarity with cultural theory. Nick Mansfield's 'The Future of the Future' engages with scholars from Alain Badiou to Slavoj Zizek to

discuss climate change. And although Alissa G. Karl impressively tries to explain the complex world of the stock market 'short sell', using the James Bond film *Casino Royale* (2006), readers without knowledge of financial markets may find themselves having to re-read.

What all authors do particularly well is to entwine texts and actual events (financial, political, and environmental) seamlessly. The suffusion of the real and imaginary, the event and the text is illustrated best in the penultimate work by Crosthwaite. He tackles the subject of 'Phantasmagoric Finance', an eye-opening paper on the widespread use of the occult in high finance, particularly the normalcy of market traders courting astrology at crisis points. He makes clear the links between imagined paranormal entities and finance. The data that speeds across computer screens as a signifier of wealth only exists – like the supernatural – because of faith or belief invested in it. The examples Crosthwaite uses range from the movie *Ghost* (1990) and the novel *American Psycho* (1991) to short novellas from *Ghost Town: Tales of Manhattan Then and Now* (2005) and more recent films π [Pi] (1998) and *National Treasure* (2004). He uses each to highlight the particular relevance that financial centres play in paranormal or supernatural narratives, which are contrary to the quotidian protocols of 'hegemonic models of market rationality and efficiency' (p.183).

It is in the financial centres of London and New York that he talks of the imagery of the supernatural being ever present, firstly through the media and word association and then the cityscape of glass finance towers surrounded by gothic architectural edges. However, the more logical assumption for the existence of both might be historical chronology. The media simply have no time to

invent metaphors for financial innovators, so rely on existing language like sage, seer, prophet, etcetera; the gothic architecture – see for instance Trinity Church, sandwiched incongruously on Wall Street – exists because that particular heritage has not yet been eroded. Crosthwaite admits this has already happened in Canary Wharf's 1988 construction which 'erased every trace of the archaic' (p.191).

Although rigorously analytical, anecdotal evidence throughout this collection ensures that complex points become comprehensible. Additionally, they ensure that some of the works are easily recalled long after reading: Wallace's tale of propagandists displaying a brave face at Chernobyl whilst the defective radioactive-popping film stock that captures them tells a different story; or when Charlie Gere traces the home computer back to the LSD-induced epiphany of acid pioneer Stewart Brand on a San Francisco rooftop in 1966; or when Crosthwaite reveals a huge upsurge in demand for psychics from city workers during the financial crisis of 2007/2008, when Jérôme Kerviel (arrested for rogue trading to the result of a five billion euro loss) uses his one request to call, not a lawyer, but a telephone psychic.

This work carves out a solid purpose for critical thought to analyse crises at a time when criticism's own obituary is being written. Although broad in subject matter, it should prove useful to students and researchers in critical, literary and cultural studies, especially to those with an interest in crisis and risk narratives. In an era when socially committed criticism is pushed to the peripheries and retreats to the academy, it is refreshing to see a work cementing the importance of the links between criticism and society. Paradoxically, at the same time as reminding us that criticism is very

much alive, these works, through their discussion of global issues, force reflection beyond what cultural criticism can achieve. The world still faces the same problems now as at the turn of the first millennium: poverty, disease, war, famine. Scholars like Terry Eagleton (2010) insist that these problems are not cultural problems to be remedied by the culture of literary and arts criticism alone: 'culture is part of our nature, not all of our nature'. Whilst championing the importance of critical thought in times of crisis, the works here do well to remind us of that in their discussions of vast global issues.

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