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Robbe, Ksenia; Gedgaudaite, Kristina; Stuit, Hanneke; Thomas, Kylie; Timofeeva, Oxana

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# In and Out of Crisis: Chronotopes of Memory

*Ksenia Robbe, Kristina Gedgaudaite, Hanneke Stuit,  
Kylie Thomas, and Oxana Timofeeva*

**Abstract** Memory is key to understanding the temporal-spatial coordinates of producing ‘crisis’ and acting in it. By reshaping infrastructures of past, present, and future, and interlinking places and spaces of crisis, memory often appears to be instrumental for proclaiming, experiencing, and responding to states of emergency.

This chapter scrutinizes the varied workings of memory in/of crises by examining mnemonic chronotopes and exploring their potential as conceptual figures. Thinking about crises through *chronotopes of memory*, that

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K. Robbe (✉)  
University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands  
e-mail: [k.robbe@rug.nl](mailto:k.robbe@rug.nl)

K. Gedgaudaite  
Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, USA  
e-mail: [kg13@princeton.edu](mailto:kg13@princeton.edu)

H. Stuit  
University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands  
e-mail: [H.H.Stuit@uva.nl](mailto:H.H.Stuit@uva.nl)

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is, temporal-spatial frameworks of recall involved in imagining and narrating, can reveal the mechanisms behind cycles of oppression (spaces marked as sites of perpetual crises; times of dispossession conceived as eternal) as well as ways of breaking these cycles, creating openings within them.

Drawing on various situated cases, the chapter reflects on the local and global dimensions of contemporary crises—of responses to migrants from the Middle East in the Greek borderlands and their ramifications within European politics; of post-truth politics in Russia in times of the war in Ukraine; of deepening structural inequalities and protest in South Africa; and of the ways in which post-transitional dystopian imaginations in the Global South and Eastern Europe are produced as well as countered through memory practices.

**Keywords** Memory chronotope • Memory route • Time loop • Porous time • Crisis of utopia/dystopia • Looking sideways

## INTRODUCTION

*Ksenia Robbe, Kristina Gedgaudaite, Hanneke Stuit, Kylie Thomas, and Oxana Timofeeva*

In times of crises, we are sustained and guided by memories. Remembering past crises is also among the first reactions to new societal disruptions, in search for understanding the causes, surviving the consequences, and imagining ways out. Earlier practices of resisting and coping, deployed by previous generations or other communities, resurface, shifting the imagined boundaries between past and present, and between perceived historical periods. Sometimes, the infrastructures that had been designed and used for other purposes come to be re-inhabited and appropriated in novel ways under the conditions of emergency.

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K. Thomas

Netherlands Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies (NIOD),  
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

O. Timofeeva

European University at St. Petersburg, St Petersburg, Russia

Such was the case on the European borders during what was labeled as the ‘refugee crisis’ in the summer of 2015. This situation revived the memories of the not-so-distant past all across the continent—Jews stranded in ‘no man’s land,’ millions of displaced persons after World War II—in the pledge for solidarity and open borders. At the same time, barbed wire fences rose across seemingly borderless Schengen Europe and the far-right politics of fear expanded its reach. In this context, appeals to memory not only structured the encounters between those deemed local and those on the move but also, in many ways, charted the itineraries that they were to follow. *The Guardian’s* migration correspondent, Patrick Kingsley, for instance, referred to the paths connecting once commonly owned Hungarian farmlands, and thus still bearing witness to Hungary’s socialist past, as one of the passages used by refugees in order to avoid policed highways (Kingsley 2016). Another example could come from Greece, where the refugee settlements that sprung up in multiple locations in makeshift camps, former factories, abandoned hotels, and other sites that provided shelter often relied on infrastructures seeped in memory and bearing witness to different moments of Greece’s history, from the Greco-Turkish War (1919–1922) to the more recent economic crisis. Reporting in 2016, Maria Margaronis (2016) likened Greek refugee camps to “a mad set of social experiments,” ranging from military dictatorship to radical democracy. Such a comparison begs the question of how mnemonic infrastructures are evoked and actualized by social actors, and how they, as a result, participate in shaping social transformations.

To remember is to create an infrastructure between past and present, to select from a web of existing and potential connections with various degrees of stability and power those that form a distinct path to orientate the movement of social energies, affects, and determinations. Space and time, and their chronotopic entwinements, play a key role in this selective reshaping. As the above examples show, evocations of past economies of living, working, producing, and interacting through the physical places and spaces that facilitated these activities can enable emergency-driven and improvisational practices of resilience. In the course and aftermath of war, conflict, ecological disasters, or political transitions, temporalities of survival and transformation typically re-arrange and create new social infrastructures for overcoming crisis and community re-making. The same contexts, however, are often characterized by imaginaries of (traumatic) repetition. Thus, by evoking links between past and present structures, memory plays a key role in how crises are produced, experienced, and

resisted. But memory is, of course, a double-edged sword: it builds infrastructures by suturing, re-assembling, and making sense. At the same time, remembrance is closely tied to power and is therefore selective and focalized, which often results in closing down possibilities for those who are not represented within the hegemonic chronotopes of proclaiming, surviving, or overcoming crises.

This chapter explores such widely diverging effects of memory by examining *the chronotopes of dealing with crises* which involve multilayered and often translocal spatio-temporal structures. Thinking about crises through *chronotopes of memory*, that is, scrutinizing the temporal-spatial structures that underlie remembrance which emerges in response to proclaimed and perceived crisis, can reveal the mechanisms behind cycles of oppression (spaces marked as sites of perpetual crises; times of dispossession and distress in these spaces conceived as eternal or endlessly recurring) as well as the ways of breaking these cycles, creating openings within them. Drawing on various situated cases, the chapter reflects on local and global dimensions of contemporary crises—of responses to migrants from the Middle East in the Greek borderlands and their ramifications within European politics; of post-truth politics in Russia in times of the war in Ukraine; of deepening structural inequalities and protest in South Africa; and of the ways in which post-transitional dystopian imaginations in the Global South (with the focus on South Africa, the most unequal country in the world; Webster 2019) and Eastern Europe are produced as well as countered through memory practices.

All essays within this chapter engage with the characteristic ambiguities of memory chronotopes, inquiring into the ways memory (re)produces and responds to crisis. In each of these varied cases our inquiry involves consideration of power and agency: who speaks about crisis and the ways of dealing with or averting it? Whose agency and politics organize memory chronotopes? We begin by considering whether and how acts of care and solidarity—such as practiced by the elderly Greek women, the descendants of those who had fled to Greece from the Ottoman Empire, toward a baby of a refugee in 2015—once circulated as a photograph and co-opted into national crisis politics, can be dis- or re-appropriated to invoke transnational identifications. The cycles of endless repetition that fit the past into the present crisis-agendas with violent consequences, particularly in times of war, can be understood as forming chronotopes of a loop. Such vicious circles can, however, be broken through memories that involve porous time. A concept rooted in space and theorized previously with

regard to architecture (Benjamin and Lacis 1986, 163–173; Boym 2001, 76–77), porosity—or a pore—can also be a chronotope that opens up repressive temporal structures. Furthermore, in contexts of failed structural transformation, site-specific artistic interventions that bring alternative time-spaces into being can produce responses to present crises beyond imaginations of endless repetition and feelings of paralysis. Finally, zooming out to the global geographies of crisis narratives has led us to reflecting on the chronotopes that underlie the processes of continuous peripheralization and resistance to it. Since the end of the Cold War, imaginations of ‘post-transitional’ Eastern Europe and the Global South have been advanced, globally and locally, through the binaries of utopia and dystopia—with iterations of exemplary change sliding into articulations of disillusionment or raising to assertions of exceptionalism. As the more recent crises are being mapped onto this texture of projections, strategies of ‘looking sideways’ practiced in contemporary cultural productions can be a way of encountering crisis beyond conventional genres or modes such as utopia and dystopia. Together, these readings of hegemonic and alternative chronotopes of memory seek to develop a set of metaphors and concepts which capture the ambiguous workings and emancipatory possibilities of memory in times of crisis.

## MEMORY ROUTES<sup>1</sup>

*Kristina Gedgaudaitė*

The summer of 2015 in the Greek context has been commonly referred to as ‘crisis within crisis’: at the time when the country negotiated over the third bailout deal at the European Commission—intended to assist in its financial crisis—dinghies swaying across the sea daily brought to the Aegean shores over a thousand people, fleeing the perils of their homes—what would soon be known as refugee and/or migrant crisis in Europe. Within this turmoil, one moment, captured by the photographer Lefteris Partsalis, stands out as a particularly vivid “moment of hope in the otherwise bleak reality” (Giannakopoulos 2016, 107). Partsalis’ photograph is taken in Skala Sykaminas, Lesbos—one of the major landing spots for refugee dinghies due to its proximity to the coast of Turkey. The image depicts an encounter between three local elderly women with a baby, moments after it reached the shores of the island in one of the dinghies. The aesthetic power of this photograph derives from the ways vulnerability and

agency intertwine in this image: the three elderly women, who themselves could be viewed as vulnerable subjects, take up an active and welcoming stance. They take care of another vulnerable subject—the baby—whose vulnerability is contrasted at the same time with the confident, positive, and relaxed stance the baby’s mother adopts in the photograph, regardless of the future uncertainties that await her family (Fig. 4.1).

In media representations, this photograph was framed as an act propelled by memory, and this was the primary way in which the significance of the women’s kindness was viewed. In the aftermath of the Greco-Turkish War (1919–1922), many Greek Orthodox inhabitants of the collapsing Ottoman Empire fled their homes using the exact same route that was taken by those fleeing from war-torn countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, in 2015. The island of Lesbos, at the center of media attention in 2015, received one of the largest populations of the Ottoman refugees in 1922, doubling the number of the island’s inhabitants at that time (Hirschon 2003). As a matter of fact, the three elderly women, who became known as ‘the grandmothers of Lesbos’ after they appeared in Partsalis’ photograph, were the daughters of the 1922 refugees.



**Fig. 4.1** Three grandmothers taking care of a refugee infant in Skala Sykaminas, Lesbos. A photograph taken by Lefteris Partsalis, summer 2015. (Image reproduced courtesy of the photographer)

When interviewed about the photograph, one of the women, Maritsa Maurapidi, immediately linked the events of 1922 and 2015, as she tried to explain the reasons behind the action captured in the frame: “Our mothers came as refugees from Turkey, from across [the sea], and they were still young girls. They came without clothes, without anything. This is why we feel sorry for the migrants” (Papadopoulos 2016). The photograph of the three grandmothers, shared across digital media platforms, provoked all sorts of reactions in the public sphere, neatly summarized by Papataxiarchis:

In official discourse, the “three grannies” became “the image of the Europe that we want,” the “good face of Europe” (Alexis Tsipras); they “personified the enormous soul of the Greek mother” (Terence Quick); their behaviour epitomized the primary concern for the “human being” and the “respect to his value” (Prokopis Pavlopoulos). A new patriotism of “solidarity” is on the way! In public discourse, the disinterested generosity of “ordinary individuals,” as it is captured in these photos, is transformed from an inalienable quality of action into an alienable substance that can be further circulated, shared in various directions with various people, and used for various political, social, and economic purposes. (Papataxiarchis 2016, 4)

A vernacular practice of the three grandmothers was appropriated as a model of citizenship that was meant to set an example both in Greece and beyond (cf. Hariman and Lucaites 2011). At the same time, the photograph also functioned as a metonymic reference to the acts of solidarity of all the inhabitants of Lesvos. This is why one of the grandmothers, Aimilia Kamvyssi, was co-nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize (along with fishermen who performed rescue operations and Hollywood actress Susan Sarandon). Praise for the grandmothers’ kindness proves how quickly an image crisscrossing the digital public sphere can be picked up and embedded into ideologies purveyed by those who have their own aims and purposes.

While the stories of the three grandmothers and their nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize were in the spotlight of media attention, the names and the story of the mother and her baby remained anonymous. Who are they and where did they come from? What did they make of the encounter with the grandmothers? Where did they go? These questions remain unanswered, and the photograph of the grandmothers turns into a self-reflecting



mirror projecting the Greeks' own image of Greek hospitality onto local and international audiences.

An occurrence on 4 November 2015 is a case in point: as the first thirty refugees were waiting to board a plane at Lesbos airport in order to be resettled in Luxembourg, the photograph was used as background for the speeches of European Parliament President Martin Schulz and Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras. At their meeting, the story of the three grandmothers as a paradigmatic case of solidarity was used to leverage better conditions for the Greek bailout deal through the call of the Prime Minister to show sympathy for the Greek islanders. "At a time when the islanders are sharing their food with refugees, the government is forced to raise VAT on the islands. These conditions are unacceptable and the Greek government will not relent," insisted Tsipras (Balezdrova 2015). The photograph of three grandmothers in the background of Tsipras' speech acted as an emotionally charged reference to add extra weight to his claims.

Tsipras appropriated the solidarity expressed by Greek people for political purposes at a time when state and international mechanisms were dismally failing to provide adequate structural assistance in addressing the refugee crisis. His speech came almost exactly four months after the Greek bailout referendum (5 July 2015), when the Greek government accepted a bailout package, even though the majority of Greek citizens voted against it. Four months later, Tsipras sided with solidarity initiatives and adopted a firm tone against austerity as a way of distancing himself from the consequences of the referendum for which he called.

A caveat is needed here to avoid confusing the media representation of the grandmothers and the circulation of their image with their act or with the initiatives of other islanders. The image of the grandmothers of Lesbos might have been used for self-serving ends, but their act along with the initiatives of many other people provided help and support at the time when the Greek state did not offer adequate structural assistance. The disparity that emerges when the two—the act and its subsequent appropriation—are considered together raises important questions about mediation of experiences and the role that memory plays in them.

Today the images of the refugee crisis have moved from the realm of emergency to that of the bleak everyday reality. It is at moments like this that we should return to the images of hope, such as the three grandmothers, and ask how such images could be reclaimed as a poignant case of mobilizing memory, even if they were previously instrumentalized for rather different purposes.

## TIME LOOPS AND POROUS TIME

*Oxana Timofeeva*

In July 2014, there was a horrific air disaster. A passenger jet Boeing 777 with 298 people aboard, operated by Malaysia Airlines and flying from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, crashed near the town of Torez in the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine, close to the Russian border. The aircraft was reportedly shot down by a surface-to-air missile. The Donetsk region is a territory involved in the ongoing military conflict between Russia and Ukraine that started earlier in that same year. This region, although still a part of Ukraine, proclaimed itself the independent Donetsk People's Republic and was at that time controlled by the so-called pro-Russian separatists who shot down Ukrainian military airplanes. Ukrainian and USA officials were certain that this aircraft, too, was shot down by rebels from Donetsk, with the support of Russians providing them with weapons. Russians, in turn, blamed Ukrainians and the US, suggesting that the catastrophe was organized by US military services in order to provoke Russia. Separatists, too, presented their accounts. The most remarkable was introduced by one of their leaders, Igor Strelkov. His version was based on the alleged reports of the locals scavenging the bodies that were falling down from the sky. According to them, some of these bodies did not have any traces of blood, were white or blue, and, as was said, smelled as if they were already dead for quite some time before the catastrophe happened. The conclusion has been made that the airplane might have departed from Amsterdam already with a strange cargo onboard, probably full of frozen corpses imitating living passengers. A conspiracy theory even emerged that this was in fact the same aircraft operated by Malaysia Airlines, which disappeared without any traces in March of the same year, in other words, three months before this air disaster—and with the same passengers onboard.

Russian tabloids are full of stories that sound as horrific as absurd. This one is no exception. In the infamous theory of the “not too fresh corpses,” there is one aspect that immediately catches the reader's imagination and, passing through the filters of reasoning, plunges into the deeper layers of her unconscious fears. Instead of being rejected as irrelevant, they must be analyzed as a kind of fiction that reveals some important elements of reality. In this horror story, passengers literally die twice. One catastrophe refers to another that precedes it, as if passengers were trapped in a

catastrophic time loop: imagine reality as an airplane that keeps crashing, with our seat belts fastened, upon the land mutilated by war.

“Even the dead will not be safe from the enemy, if he wins,” writes Walter Benjamin (2003, 391) in his sixth thesis on the concept of history. The time loop designates the situation when the enemy keeps winning. It is an element of the general time settings of the ontological structure of the war. Another image of it is a corridor of infinity, created by the two mirrors that reflect each other. One war reflects in the other and repeats it: in Afghanistan and in Syria, in Ukraine and in Kosovo, in Iraq and in Vietnam, the eternal return of the same produces a short circuit of repetition of the same horrific scenarios. Is there a way out of it?—Yes. There is always a way out, and it is not one, if we understand time as neither linear, nor circular, but porous. The idea of the porosity of time helps to understand the structure which does not only collapse in catastrophic loops, but also resides within alternative chronotopes. Here, the example of the route taken by Greek refugees in 1922 and, then again, by refugees from Middle East in 2015 is emblematic. No matter how politicians were using this case in their interests, the image of a Greek grandmother taking care of a refugee baby provides an idea of a time pore, which is also a place for a repetition (different women, same route, same fate), but which, unlike the time loop, does not create an infinite mirror corridor of the repetition of the same. A time pore is like the rabbit-hole from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*: you never know where it will lead you—not a loop, but a labyrinth with multiple tracks. Memories of the oppressed teach us to be in solidarity with the generations of the past.

## A CRISIS OF TIME, A TIME OF CRISIS

*Kylie Thomas*

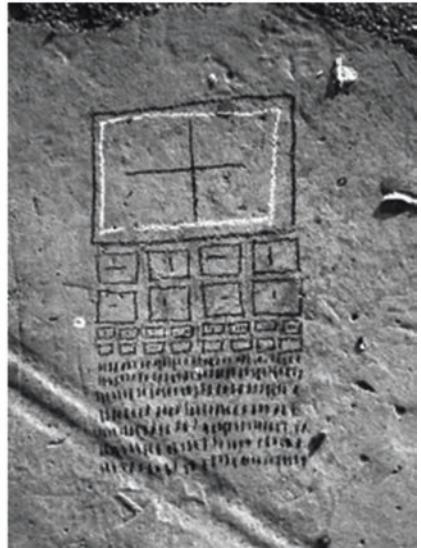
there is no logical contradiction entailed by the existence of closed temporal lines or journeys to the past; we are the ones who complicate things with our confused fantasies about the supposed freedom of the future. (Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time* 2018, 48)

*Notes on Space* is an intervention in public space and a series of drawings and photographs made by artist Daniel Nel in a small town in South Africa in the Eastern Cape Province that colonial settlers called Grahamstown and that is now named Makhanda. It is a series of images that shows how

prosaic time and space is altered when it is filtered through the eyes and hands of an artist and translated into something that makes a different order of time and space visible. These transitory marks made in charcoal and chalk, substances as fragile as ash or powder-dust, are the residue of ancient life-forms, stones, and bones. These marks are made alongside, against, the minor monuments that constitute the being of the town, the Cathedral at the center and the civic institutions intended to regulate life and death, the Department of Home Affairs where births and deaths are registered, the Department of Labour, the library, a memorial, the science laboratory, the gymnasium, a bridge, and other more ambiguous sites that gesture toward the margins of administered life, the drain, the ditch, fruit trees, and the ruins of what once were dwellings. There are the sites, and then the signs introduced by the artist's hand at the time of their making, and then there are the photographs, which like all photographs, are quite literally taken out of time. The photographs of the drawings are like notes from a future time that has not yet happened, after the buildings and sites documented in the photographs turn into ruins. And the threat of ruin is ever-present in the town that has always been a site of crisis (Figs. 4.2–4.5).

The town was named after the British Colonel John Graham who waged a bitter war against the indigenous Xhosa people in 1811, ultimately forcing more than 20,000 people to leave their homes. In 2018, 200 years after the Xhosa were forced from their land, and almost 25 years after the end of apartheid, the town was renamed in honor of Makhanda ka Nxele, a warrior who prophesized that the white colonizers would be driven into the sea. After the Xhosa were defeated Nxele was captured and imprisoned on Robben Island. In 1819, together with around thirty other prisoners, he attempted to escape from the island but his boat capsized and he drowned before reaching the shore (Ngcukaitobi 2019). The renaming of the town is intended as a form of symbolic reparation for the violence of the past and seeks to remove the painful reminder of conquest evoked by the name Grahamstown as much as it seeks to mark it through invoking Makhanda (Figs. 4.6–4.9 and 4.10–4.13).

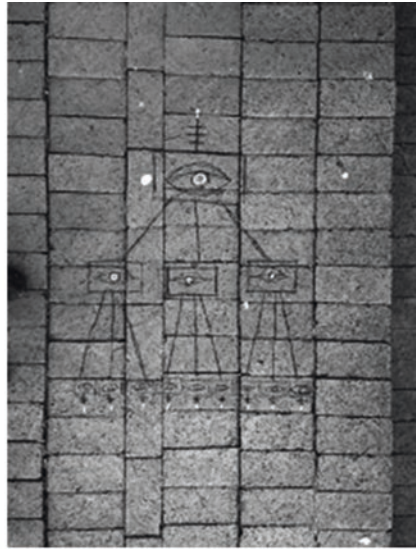
More than a century of colonial exploitation was followed by the implementation of apartheid and the legacy of these oppressive systems continue to contaminate the present. Makhanda is one of the most economically impoverished places in the country, and the local government is riddled with corruption (Pather 2019). In 2015 there were xenophobic attacks perpetrated against people from Somalia, Ethiopia, China, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sudan, Palestine, Egypt, and Zimbabwe—shops were looted and



**Figs. 4.2–4.5** *Church and Department of Home Affairs*. From the series *Notes on Space*; photographs and drawings by Daniel Nel, 2014. (Images reproduced courtesy of the artist)



**Figs. 4.6–4.9** *Department of Labour* and *University Library*. From the series *Notes on Space*; photographs and drawings by Daniel Nel, 2014. (Images reproduced courtesy of the artist)



**Figs. 4.10–4.13** *Computer Laboratory and Ruins*. From the series *Notes on Space*; photographs and drawings by Daniel Nel, 2014. (Images reproduced courtesy of the artist)

burned, and more than 500 people were forced to flee from the homes they had established in Makhanda (“Xenophobia and Outsider Exclusion” 2017).

The current crisis that consumes the energy of those who live in the town and that dominates media representations of the place is the severe drought that has lasted for five years thus far:

Makhanda (formerly Grahamstown) is having the worst water crisis in its history. Extended drought in parts of the Eastern Cape, combined with municipal neglect of water supply infrastructure, has created a situation that may become a major health and sanitation crisis. Parts of Makhanda East, where the townships are located, have been without running water for up to nine days, causing outrage among residents. (Nowicki 2019)

A statement issued by activist group Unemployed People’s Movement conveys how the crisis of the present is bound to the loss of the imagined future promised at the time of the transition in 1994:

Makhanda is a broken town. The whole world knows this. The ANC have looted the town’s money, year after year, with no consequences. They have enriched themselves while impoverishing the town, and leading to a collapse in its most basic services. In the Makana Municipality it has been the worst of times, the age of foolishness, the epoch of incredulity, the season of darkness, the winter of despair. In 1995 we had everything before us, and today we have nothing before us. We are struggling for the best of times, for the age of wisdom, for the epoch of belief, for the season of light, for the spring of hope, we are struggling to have everything before us. (“Crisis in Makhanda” 2019)

This statement conveys how the bitter struggle for freedom in the past failed to result in the imagined “season of light” that would come after the end of apartheid. The words used to describe the catastrophic loss of hope as the promises made by the new government were betrayed reach toward a biblical register, expressing a profound sense of being out of time. In 1995 the future was everywhere and now, “we have nothing before us” (Figs. 4.14 and 4.15).

One of Nel’s images shows water flowing from the mouth of a large overflow drainpipe. On the wall alongside it Nel has inscribed a row of shapes that resemble raindrops or tears, all except one outlined in black and shaded in white chalk. The ominous ninth drop seems to signify black





**Figs. 4.14 and 4.15** *Drain*. From the series *Notes on Space*; photographs and drawings by Daniel Nel, 2014. (Images reproduced courtesy of the artist)

rain or blood. Alongside these pictograms is a swiftly but beautifully rendered outline of an animal's skull, a goat or a small buck, something with horns and black marks like sticks in the place where the empty eye-sockets should be. The dark message of these cryptic signs is amplified by the textured ground upon which they are etched, a place out of time, an otherworldly sky, or planetary surface stretching back into the darkness that seems to extend beyond the borders of the image. The abyss that is beyond time, beyond crisis. If Nel's drawings oscillate between what Ksenia Robbe and Hanneke Stuit in the following part refer to as dystopian chronotopes and the redemptive utopianism of creative vision, his photographs insist on *the prosaic*—in this particular image, water, a symbol of life and hope, senselessly spilling out onto the road.

## LOOKING SIDWAYS: BEYOND THE CRISIS OF GENRE

*Ksenia Robbe and Hanneke Stuit*

Let us now shift focus from the genres of crisis (i.e., how crises are framed through the use of specific rhetorical and compositional forms) toward what is often referred to, during the past decade in particular, as the crisis of the genres which have been formative for our present. If, following Mikhail Bakhtin, chronotopes are structures that define genres (Bakhtin 1981, 85), then engaging the dynamics of these temporal-spatial constructions may elucidate the processes of erosion and “fraying” of the genres that have directed our perception of the world and its conflicts (Berlant 2011, 196). Here, we reflect on the dialectical relationship between utopia and dystopia, as such formative genres across modernity. While approaching this situation of crisis as global yet asymmetrically shared, we locate our interpretation in the time-places of the postsocialist and the postcolonial, which have structurally functioned as peripheries with an exoticized “image-function” for the West (Brennan 2005). In what follows, we put into a dialogue the region of Eastern Europe, considering the intersection of postsocialist and postcolonial dimensions within it,<sup>2</sup> and South(ern) Africa, as a more specific example of postcoloniality. We reflect on what can be regarded as the condition of ‘post-transition’ which these regions and societies share, each in particular ways. Both regions exemplify the crises of the 1980–1990s transitions and of the concomitant politics of history, time, and accelerated globalization that are more recently perceived in the Global North/West as the ‘contemporary’ crises. What can be learnt from these persisting and interconnected crises when they are considered across their societal locations?

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the end of apartheid, and, by now, the end of transition narratives, peculiar engagements with the utopia-dystopia nexus and its fragments persist. Yet, these generic preoccupations are, arguably, becoming increasingly inadequate to present-day challenges and aspirations. If the Cold War period was characterized by competing or mutually reinforcing utopian projects (socialist, anti-colonial as well as varieties of capitalist and segregation-based regimes), the time of the globally entangled ‘transitions’ of the 1980s and 1990s saw a proliferation of dystopias. At the time, the dystopian forms were offsetting progressivist and homogenizing visions of societies ‘united in diversity,’ and ‘catching up’ with ‘the democratic world.’ Three decades later, however, even

though a sense of a global triumph of democracy has been displaced by apocalyptic visions of the present and future, dystopian fictions seem to begin losing their critical edge.

This “fraying” of the genre (Berlant 2011, 196) is most evident in current proliferations of apocalyptic narratives engaging the processes of climate change on the one hand and the effects of increasingly predatory capitalisms on the other, generating a sense of disaster without end. While bearing the potential for critical anticipatory thinking and remembering, often by “mobilizing mourning as a potent political practice” (Craps 2017, 489), dystopian fictions can also foreclose critique by avoiding reflection on questions of causality and agency behind crisis. Postsocialist and postcolonial spaces have notoriously been the privileged ground for such imaginations, both in ‘local’ and ‘global’ productions of the past decades. More recently, however, apocalyptic chronotopes from Eastern Europe (imagined as ‘already fallen’) seem to shift toward Western media landscapes, for instance in zombie computer games in which the ‘East’ starts functioning “as a ruin to pillage for new utopian ambitions, new communities and a more un-scripted and genuine society” (Leiderman 2016, 35). As scholars of critical postsocialist studies increasingly observe, there is a need to move beyond the dystopian visions of Eastern Europe as “the ground zero of authoritarian encroachment and growing ascendance of reactionary values” as well as “the occasional Euro-American fascination with phenomena like the ‘Pussy Riot’ or the Ukrainian Maidan” (Kurtović and Sargsyan 2019, 1).

In the case of post-apartheid South Africa, optimism regarding the end of apartheid and inauguration of democracy has given way to dystopian imaginaries in the aftermath of the Marikana killings in 2012. This “swing between fear and optimism, pessimism and hope” is not new to the South African cultural imagination, and one can discern a carefully optimistic turn after the election of Cyril Ramaphosa, who, despite his involvement in Marikana, “once again embodies the liberation movements’ more glorious years after the first elections” (Frenkel and Gupta 2019, 174–175). Here, the cause for optimism is attached to a positive reading of the past, reflecting a “yo-yo culture” between the fixed poles of the utopian and the dystopian without a clear reading of the temporal dimensions involved (Frenkel and Gupta 2019). Such imaginations run the risk of producing “prisoners to linearity,” who see no “reason for a creative orientation towards the unfolding of history” (Titlestad 2016, 72).

Instead, one possible solution would be to “emphasize the variety of ways in which meanings arise from the dynamic intersection of shifting temporalities,” rather than to devise grand narratives for the future that do not “take account of the continual revisiting, revising and reorganizing of the past” (Titlestad 2016, 73). These times of globalizing dystopias accompanied by convoluted attempts at conjuring new utopias, then, could be an apt moment to start *looking sideways*,<sup>3</sup> beyond the renderings of past and present crises through the utopia-dystopia nexus and beyond transition narratives or iterations of their failures. Such sideways gazes could be focused on “slow moving forms of political action” (Kurtović and Sargsyan 2019, 2) which may appear in activist practices including those of (literary) writing, performance, and film- and art-making.

Attending to the chronotope, as the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships,” in cultural imaginations of crisis and transition could be one way of looking sideways (Bakhtin 1981, 84). In the chronotope, time “thickens, takes on flesh,” and “space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time,” creating a sense of situated experience that structures imaginations and makes time tangible in reality (Bakhtin 1981, 84, 253). Some chronotopes, like the idyll, featuring the desire to return to simpler times in pleasantly isolated spaces, are persistent and reappear in cultural expressions and situations in which they are, in fact, both outdated and out of place. In other cases, chronotopes travel so much or are repeated so often, that their specific, historic, or material intersections of space-time flatten out until they lose their potential to effectively figure and structure life-worlds. This flattening out, in the case of the utopia-dystopia nexus, moves either toward renditions and experiences of time as spaceless, leading to Benjamin’s notion of “homogenous and empty time” (Benjamin 2003, 395), or toward a timeless space, where they become a mere topos: a commonplace that rubs shoulders with the naturalized efficacy of dead metaphors.

The topos, as readymade encounter with what used to be full of chronotopic import, represents a harmful filtering out of time from specific intersections of time and space. These places then circulate as floating signifiers that are easy to appropriate without regard for their historical and material situatedness. In the case of imaginations of the South African rural, for instance, various forms of the rural idyll persist, often with reference to the *plaas* (farm). This topos of the *plaas* has historically been marked by colonization and dispossession, yet remains invested with an idyllic imagination of pastoral retreat. In this sense, it represents an

“uncanny repetition ... of what has not been assimilated in post-apartheid modernity” (Klopper 2014, 102). Its relation to time is particularly complex, because the image of the *plaas* represents various utopian and dystopian perceptions of the past, present, and future for different cultural and ethnic groups in South Africa. Despite this complexity, the *plaas* lingers in popular culture as a benevolently and autonomously managed pocket of space that protects its direct community of family and farmworkers from capitalist and State machinations (Coetzee 1988, 78). Often, in predominantly white-focalized narratives, this a-temporal topos of the *plaas* is problematically held up as a sustainable solution for post-transition South Africa in films like *Treurgrond* (Titlestad 2016). The topos has been repeated so often without scrutiny of its chronotopic specificity, that even the *plaasroman* genre’s power to think its own ambiguity has worn thin.

Its idyllic image demands scrutiny because it is located at the nexus of South Africa’s “deeply divided countryside” and the restorative nostalgic charge attached to this image of spatial control devoid of historical time remains influential (Hall et al. 2013, 48). Looking sideways, beyond the *plaas*, reveals that it is propped up by another chronotope: the Bantustans. This historic dualism between “commercial farming areas of the former [Republic of South Africa] and the former communal areas of the Bantustans” still plays a major role in the South African rural today (Hall et al. 2013, 48). The fact that black farmers could not own land outside of the Bantustans throughout much of the twentieth century was a colonial strategy that secured these places’ fate as labor reserves for South African mines, factories, and farms during ‘grand’ apartheid. In this colonial vision, which resonated throughout the Southern African region, “rural people were [paradoxically] seen as both underemployed and self-sustaining” (O’Laughlin 2013, 175). In this “myth of sustenance farming” (O’Laughlin 2013, 186–189), rural populations are miraculously expected to get by resorting to farming, even though they do not have access to the necessary social, health care or economic infrastructures that would allow them to do so. In this sense, the idyllic and autonomous farming that structures the topos of the *plaas* is projected on other space-times, with detrimental effects. Looking sideways at the topos of the *plaas*, then, infuses it with different historical realities than its flattened out insinuations would allow for and reveals other chronotopic structures that intersect with it and on which it antagonistically relies.

This dynamic of de-historizing space is complemented, in South Africa and other ‘post-transitional’ societies, by de-spatializations of time. The

latter encompass the neglect of spatial specificity in narratives of transition and transitional justice and, more recently, attempts to address this void. According to Benjamin, revolutionary classes “explode the continuum of history,” citing specific time-spaces of the past in the time-space of the present (for Robespierre, Roman antiquity was reflected in the French Revolution) (Benjamin 2003, 395). In his historical materialist vision, this chronotopic concreteness is opposed to “the ‘eternal’ picture of the past”—the time which is “homogenous and empty,” that is, not recognizing the experience and subjectivity of those who shape it in the present (ibid.).

During the 1990s, when societies of Eastern Europe, Southern Africa, and Latin America were experiencing major regime transformations, narratives of transition were promoting homogenizing visions of time with specificities of space and locality filtered out of transitional justice tropes. The rhetoric of catching-up stressed the “end of history” imaginations (Fukuyama 1992) while obscuring the ways in which time was experienced and space divided anew (with inequalities often enhanced) in the transforming locations. Today, practices of remembering these transformational and revolutionary times emerge, which look back to those days from within present-day “problem spaces” (Scott 2004) and ask questions pertaining to these current space-times. So, in celebrations of thirty years since ‘1989’ in Eastern Europe, we can discern ways of drawing on “illiberal historical traditions” as well as on “local and transnational traditions of dissent” to advance contemporary political struggles (Iacob et al. 2019, 5). Not only do such memories of democratic transformations diverge in their political orientations and effects, but they also involve diverse conceptions of identity and are thus not reducible to “identity politics,” which Fukuyama (2018) in his updated perspective on the fates of liberalism considers the universal cause and tool of resistance to the purported post-1989 consensus.

In a similar vein, strategies of revising transition narratives in literature and art range from various forms of ‘forgetting’ or ‘blackwashing’ the period of transformations (accompanied by implicit justification of the earlier regimes’ practices of injustice) to the emerging practices of shaping polyphonic visions and trans-generational solidarities through memories of the transitions. While the latter involve narratives of trauma and restorative nostalgia (Alchuk and Ryklin 2006, 47–49; Khagi 2008; Titlestad 2016), the former develop postmemorial perspectives (Hirsch 2008; O’Connell 2018; Robbe 2019). Thus, beyond the spectacularity of

romantic and tragic modes of narrating revolutionary transformations (Scott 2014) in the 1990s, as well as beyond the traumatic circularity of the more recent representations, we may be witnessing practices of looking sideways onto the transitions, from the perspectives of ordinary life and marginal (e.g., children's) subjectivities (Robbe *forthcoming*).

In crisis, the images right in front of you can be very unpleasant. There is a great pull to look away from what is there, to stare at it too intently, or to oscillate on the utopian-dystopian continuum involved in crisis thinking. How *does* one face crisis productively? Although the overwhelmingly negative affective charge of crisis poses challenges to individual and collective initiatives alike, looking sideways—by developing genres of dealing with crisis beyond visions of ends or endlessness—can be a way to avoid myopia, utopia, and dystopia without foreclosing the temporal productivity that inevitable reflections on the past, present, and future entail. When looking sideways, one does not forget what has already been seen, but one enriches the seen with what is adjacent to it, what informs it and makes it possible. By looking at crisis through the lens of the chronotopic, horizontal views that avoid a restaging of familiar universal time or empty topoi can be activated. The currently growing attention to vernacular memories of historical transformations for which narratives of transition, and their utopian or dystopian elaborations, have long been used as a shorthand, reflects possible ways of developing such horizontal views. Across the postcolonial and postsocialist spaces that have experienced transformations (and disillusionment with many of them), these memories, besides appearing in or on the margins of the mainstream, are shaped in online fora, memoir writing or oral history collections and focus on minor events, local and family histories, and personal revelations. Such remembrance may, as it often happens, be instrumentalized by various actors, but it may also resonate beyond local communities precisely through its concreteness, its groundedness in specific space-times.

## NOTES

1. The example analyzed here has also been discussed in Gedgaudaite (2021), where it is put in dialogue with other memories used to frame the refugee crisis in Greece through media discourses in 2015–2016.
2. For some important contributions to the study of these intersections see the special issue of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* “On Colonialism, Communism and East-Central Europe” (Kolodziejczyk and Sandru 2012),

the volume *Postcolonial Europe? Essays on Post-Communist Literatures and Cultures* (Pucherova and Gafrik 2015), and Madina Tlostanova's *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism in Fiction and Art* (2017).

3. In conceptualizing this practice, we draw inspiration from Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick's (2002) method of "reparative reading" (as an alternative to "paranoid reading") and from Svetlana Boym's (2010) concept of the "off-modern" which suggests "lateral" politics of reading, beyond the modern and postmodern, and re-collects unexplored potentials for modernity.

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