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## CAN READING STORIES SAVE THE PLANET? NARRATING THE WORLD (OUT) OF THE POLY/PERMACRISIS

While it has taken humanity decades to actually recognize the gravity of its circumstances, it seems it has finally dawned on most that we are living in the end times. “This ‘end of the world’,” however, “does not resemble the ends of religious prophecies or disaster films, in which the human experiment culminates in dramatic final spectacles. Instead,” Amanda Hess argues, “we persist in an oxymoronic state, inhabiting an end that has already begun but may never actually end” (Hess 2022). Though definitely on a downward spiral—scorched, entangled in conflicts and wars, and ridden with inequality, pandemics, and famine—the world is still standing, leaving contemporary people in a protracted Apocalypse Now they all feel but find too confusing to fully comprehend. As befits a digital era, the real is reflected in the virtual, and so, the increasing confusion of recent years—together with a whole array of accompanying emotions people experience, like fear, guilt, shame, and anger—has triggered both an explosion of online content, i.e. memes, cartoons, and videos addressing the end more or less directly (and seriously), and an upsurge in word formation, aimed at naming and thus familiarizing (and at least partially disarming) the many riders of post-millennial apocalypse.

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Name it to tame it. Even though people’s eagerness to name everything around them might testify to humankind’s unresolved god complex or species-specific possessiveness, the current intensification of name-giving and neologization appears to communicate people’s increased attempts at confronting, organizing, and coming to terms with reality by connecting with others through common points of reference. The hashtags and buzzwords which are currently trending touch upon matters related to, among others, politics or economy (lawforce, stagflation, finfluencer), technology (techlash), workplace relations (quite quitting, bandwidth, zoom-booming), social dynamics and trends (gaslighting, #IStandWith, baby bust, sharent, situationship), people’s general disposition (doomscrolling, goblin mode, nomophobia, JOMO) or their felt experience of reality (vibe shift, New Normal). While the majority of current buzzwords are rather specific in focus, the years 2022 and 2023 witnessed also the rise of two words—polycrisis and permacrisis—aspiring to represent the current moment comprehensively, in both its many-sided apocalypticism and unsettling chronicity.

The term “polycrisis” appears to have been first used by the French complexity theorist Edgar Morin and Anne Brigitte Kern (1999) in *Homeland Earth: A Manifesto for the New Millennium*, with reference to the “complex intersolidarity of problems” (74) or “polycrisical sets of interwoven and overlapping crises” (73) that plague the planet. The term was subsequently revived in 2018 by Jean-Claude Juncker, the president of the European Commission, who used it in his speech at the Annual General Meeting of the Hellenic Federation of Enterprises. In the speech, Juncker mentioned the challenges the EU was facing in mid 2010s—security risks, increased migration, and the impending Brexit—and drew the audience’s attention to not just the problems’ simultaneity but also their tendency to “feed each other” (Juncker 2016). It is, however, only recently that the term polycrisis has been actually brought to public attention and started going viral.

The person responsible for popularizing the term is the Columbia University historian Adam Tooze. In an opinion piece published on 28 October 2022, Tooze “Welcome[d]” the readers of the *Financial Times* “to the world of polycrisis” (Tooze 2022), describing it as a strange world of cascading, intertwined shocks. In an interview he gave during the 2023 World Economic Forum’s Annual Meeting in Davos, Tooze subsequently traced the origins of the post-millennial polycrisis back to 2008, the year which had witnessed the onset of the financial crisis, Russia’s attack on Georgia, the failure of WTO negotiations in Geneva, Sarah Palin becoming Joe Biden’s running

mate, as well as the outbreak of the swine flu epidemic. Polycrisis, Tooze argued in the interview, denotes “not a single crisis with a single clearly defined logic” but exactly such “coming together at a single moment of things which, on the face of it, don’t have anything to do with each other, but seem to pile onto [and exacerbate] each other” (qtd. in Whiting 2023). In 2023, once only a #buzzword, the term started gaining not just momentum but also legitimacy. In January 2023, polycrisis was officially recognized by the WEF *Global Risks Report 2023*. Drawing on Tooze, the report defined polycrisis as “a cluster of related global risks”—mostly “environmental, geopolitical and socioeconomic”—“with compounding effects, such that the overall impact exceeds the sum of each part” (World Economic Forum 2023, 57, 9). In addition, the report emphasized the importance of both monitoring the increasingly interlocking global crises and early implementation of complex preventive measures. The following months witnessed the proliferation of academic conferences devoted to polycrises in the fields of, among others, finance, international relations, health, and security, and in April 2023, on the pages of *Anthropology Today*, David Henig and Daniel M. Knight made a compelling case for embracing polycrisis as “arguably” the “most ambitious [recent] endeavour to grapple with the urgency of ‘now’” as well as an apt “analytic framework ... to capture the world in systemic transition” (2023, 3).

In their article, Henig and Knight point to not only the “increased speed, intensity and complexity” (6) of contemporary crises but also their extended temporalities (3). In so doing, they highlight a current shift in the understanding of the very word “crisis”, and invoke a word coined around the same time as polycrisis: permacrisis.<sup>1</sup> Rooted in Ancient Greek, the word “crisis” refers to a turning point, a decisive moment, bound to occasion change for either better or worse. “By its very definition,” Henig and Knight stipulate, “crisis is [thus] necessarily fleeting, a rupture in the regular or expected progression of things” (3). Nowadays, however—Henig and Knight continue—“the unexpected becomes routine” and “many problems [are] ... protracted and routinized,” so that “[t]he temporal indexes of contemporary crises far outstay the momentary or sudden” (3), the most obvious examples being climate change and its epiphenomena or the manifold aftereffects of the COVID-19 pandemic. As crises melt into each other, their eventedness condenses. Their sum total creates “a static and permanently difficult situa-

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<sup>1</sup> While acknowledging the “explicit link” between polycrisis and permacrisis, Henig and Knight mention the latter term only briefly, in a footnote thanking Charles Stewart for informing them about the term’s coinage (3).

tion”, which, as Neil Turnbull rightly surmises, “can only be managed, not resolved” (Turnbull), for it is no longer possible to point to individual causes and every solution is inevitably only partial. Polycrisis and permacrisis are thus two sides of the same coin; while the former focuses more on the plurality and interconnectedness of problems contemporary world is facing, the latter expresses rather the emotional toll of “living in an ongoing state of uncertainty and worry” (Beecroft qtd. in Ng) and points to the destructive influence protracted crises have on people’s ability to navigate and make sense of reality.

Everything Everywhere All at Once—contemporaneity truly is a multi-verse of crises. First, there is an ontological crisis, resultant, among others, from the financialization of the everyday, with being more often than not reduced to mere existence within “the immense, incalculable scope of 24/7 capitalism and its frenzy of accumulation, extraction, circulation, production, transport, and construction, on a global scale” (Crary 2022).<sup>2</sup> Then enter, among others, a financial crisis of debt, jumping inflation, and rising costs of living; a security crisis—terrorist threats and attacks, wars destroying countries and nations, torture, genocide, and millions of people leaving their homes and cultures in search for safety and a better life only to crash against increasing xenophobia and racism; populism; a (geo)political crisis, driven by the twilight of hegemons as well as continuing shifts on the global tiers of power; the weaponization of patriotism “in the form of an aggressive nationalism,” which, to quote from Gordon Brown et al., comes to “replace ... neoliberalism as the dominant ideology of the age” (Brown et al., 2023); not to overlook a work crisis, characterized by job shortages, rising unemployment, and widespread burnout. The world is ravaged by climate change and its multiple consequences, e.g. heatwaves, droughts, earthquakes, rising sea levels and floods, dying ecosystems, food shortages, environmental migration, and epidemics, but also by climate change denial; people’s growing distrust of governments, corporations, and of each other; social unrest; the renunciation of logic and rationality and the consequent spread of fake news, conspiracy theories, and pseudoscience; lies sugarcoated as post-truth; increasing social inequality; healthcare crisis and the rise of anti-vaxxers. Ir-

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<sup>2</sup>Of course, let us not forget that capitalism too is in crisis, and has been for quite a while, being called all kinds of names like “[l]ate, autumnal, down-turning, immiserating, terminal” (Brouillette et al. 2019, 326). While that could seem consoling, it is not. Although more and more scholars herald capitalism’s looming end, the system, Brouillette et al. argue, “neither falls nor is replaced, but simply continues limping forward” (325), reminiscent of a zombie, feeding on life and people’s apocalyptic anxieties.

revocable damage is done by rampant consumerism, which regulates expectations and fabricates needs, manipulating people into making choices they do not want to make, as well as by progressing digitalization of life, inundation with content, growing surveillance, online manipulation, and uncontrolled development of AI. People experience an increasing sense of precarity; “[e]verything necessary for a minimal sense of stability, whether jobs, homes, communities or health care is, by design, always on the edge of being discarded, downsized, foreclosed, demolished” (Crary 2022), resulting, finally, in personal and psychological crises, i.e. loneliness, disconnection, sense of disempowerment, depression, addiction, abuse, and suicide.

These crises, “and many others,” Brown et al. argue, “show no signs of abating, only accelerating” (Brown et al. 2023) and interconnecting more and more tightly. The “*knotted eventedness*” (Henig and Knight 2023, 6) of the post-millennial polycrisis has a disorienting and unnerving effect; in addition to reducing the world to a blur and making people feel as if they are losing their grip on reality—is this really happening? (Tooze 2022)—the density of the polycrisis locks people in a state of permanent emergency, keeping them helpless and constantly on their toes.

Permacrisis, i.e. the actual lived experience of the current polycrisis, is fraught with anxiety, which makes individuals lose their plot. As what used to be the stuff of nightmares materializes (and on an unprecedented scale), “familiar assumptions ... [get] upended” (Frost 2022), and collective narratives, which normally sustain and help people understand and navigate reality, crumble and collapse. This is further complicated by the absence of “narrative consensus” (Rao 2020) pertaining to the causes and effects of what is happening. While it might not meet all of Venkatesh Rao’s criteria of globality,<sup>3</sup> the narrative collapse characteristic of permacrisis definitely casts people

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<sup>3</sup> According to Rao, for a narrative collapse to be called global, it has to be “fairly severe” and “relatively sudden” as well as endowed with what Rao calls “a very surreal glued-to-screens quality” indicative of a societal loss of narrative: “everybody ... tracking the rawest information they have access to, rather than the narrative that most efficiently sustains their reality” (Rao 2020). What a truly global narrative event does as well is influence the way the global society perceives time—as subjective temporalities “collapse ... to the log level”, time comes to be measured not in hours but in information updates—and suspend people’s usual need for a relative “narrative consensus” (Rao). While, in Rao’s opinion, only four recent events meet these criteria (the fall of the Berlin Wall, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Donald Trump becoming president, and the coronavirus pandemic), his perspective is inevitably very Americentric. From where we stand—a medium-size city in the South East of a fairly large Central European country—the shortlist should definitely include, for instance, the rise of far-right governments in Hungary or Poland in the 2010s,

adrift, leaving them unsure what is happening, with their lives progressing from one mobile push alert and TV news ticker to another, and suffering from new PTSD (Present Traumatic Stress Disorder).

It takes more than a buzzword or a fancy title to conjure a story—retrieving a narrative frame, even a personal one, is no easy task.<sup>4</sup> When a narrative collapse impacts the entire society, and a global and divided one, renarration becomes even more problematic. Regardless of scale or the measures taken, each attempt at narrative retrieval inevitably hinges on regaining the sense of agency and striving towards what, drawing on Frank Kermode, could be called “temporal *reintegration*”, i.e. the “[re]bundling together [of] perception of the present, memory of the past, and expectation of the future, in a common organization” (2000, 46). While naming and taming might work short-term, the actual renarration of contemporaneity out of the poly/permacrisis seems to require thus not only practical fixes, that is decisive implementation of reforms or the choice of new growth plans, but also narrative models or blueprints for confronting and making sense of what the world has become, while envisaging possible futures. This is where culture comes into play.

Culture (and the study thereof) augments people’s perception of reality. “Reading poetry won’t save the planet,” Timothy Morton writes in *The Ecological Thought* (2010), alluding to the common dismissal of humanities as purely theoretical and thus useless. “Sound science and progressive social policies will do that,” he acknowledges, “[b]ut art can allow us to glimpse ... beyond or between our normal categories” (60). Highlighting the importance of humanities as a medium for “ask[ing] questions that science should address, questions that scientists may not have asked yet” (12–13). Morton uses art as an umbrella term for a plethora of literary, artistic, and cultural creations and argues in favor of art’s potential to vocalize the unspeakable. Mimetic in character, receptive of ambiguity, and open to taboo and speculation—themes of “intensity, shame, abjection, and loss, ... reality and unreality, being and seeming” (10)—art can guide people through (and possibly out of) the trauma (and terror) of contemporaneity (Nilges 2009, 75) by helping them connect the dots of the present, and imagine and write alternative scenarios for the future.

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Putin’s 2021 aggression on Ukraine, the migration crisis that ensued, and the fears of the third world war it triggered.

<sup>4</sup> See Julial Nikiel, *It Takes a Storyteller To Know a Storyteller: Global Capitalism in Post-Millennial North American Fiction* (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 135–50.

It is the conviction that artistic and narrative imagination is instrumental in not just managing but also transforming reality that connects the essays collected in this special issue. Each of the essays presents a world or worlds in (poly/perma)crisis. Whether micro or macro in scale—personal, intimate, and local or public, societal, and international—the crises described expose vulnerabilities, wreck comfort zones, shock, and traumatize. Far from only depicting the havoc wreaked, the literary and visual representations of crises analyzed in this cluster use story-telling to comb through causes, organize the debris, and look beyond what is to suggest ways of not simply rebuilding expiring worlds but also thinking and shaping new and more sustainable ones. While culture and literature might actually not save the planet, the authors of the following nine essays demonstrate, stories—whatever the medium they are told through—“make and remake worlds”. Acting “both as technologies of survival and sites of ... struggle”, they help individuals “see ... possibility where [all] they [normally] see [is] ruin” (Trimble 2019, 3, 145).

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CAN READING STORIES SAVE THE PLANET?  
NARRATING THE WORLD (OUT) OF THE POLY/PERMACRISIS

Summary

While the majority of contemporary buzzwords are rather specific in focus, the years 2022 and 2023 witnessed the viral rise of two words—"polycrisis" and "permacrisis"—aspiring to represent the post-millennial moment comprehensively, in both its many-sided apocalypticism and unsettling chronicity. The word "polycrisis" focuses on the plurality and interconnectedness of problems contemporary world is facing; "permacrisis," on the other hand, expresses rather the emotional toll of continuous anxiety, and points to the destructive influence protracted crises have on people's ability to navigate and make sense of (i.e. narrate) reality. Retrieving a once lost narrative frame is no easy task. The renarration of contemporaneity out of the "narrative collapse" (Rao 2020) occasioned by the current poly/permacrisis seems to require thus not only practical fixes, that is decisive implementation of reforms or the choice of new growth plans, but also narrative models for confronting and interpreting what the world has become, while envisaging possible futures.

**Keywords:** contemporaneity; polycrisis; permacrisis; (global) narrative collapse; renarration



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CZY CZYTANIE OPOWIEŚCI MOŻE URATOWAĆ PLANETĘ?  
NARRACJA (KONTR)A WSPÓŁCZESNY POLI/PERMAKRYZYS

Streszczenie

Podczas gdy większość współczesnych buzzwordów jest dość uściślona w swoim znaczeniu, lata 2022 i 2023 były świadkami wzrostu wiralności dwóch słów — „polikryzysu” i „permakryzysu” — mających ambicje odzwierciedlić post-milennialny moment w całej jego apokaliptyczności i kryzysowej przewlekłości. Słowo „polikryzys” odnosi się do wielości i wzajemnej zależności pomiędzy problemami, z jakimi obecnie boryka się świat; „permakryzys” przywołuje zaś emocjonalne konsekwencje, jakie pociąga za sobą nieustające odczuwanie niepokoju i wskazuje na destrukcyjny wpływ rozciągniętych w czasie kryzysów na ludzką umiejętność nawigowania i rozumienia, tj. narracyjnego postrzegania rzeczywistości. Raz zgubione, ramy narracyjne są trudne do odzyskania. Przewycięzenie (globalnego) „upadku narracyjnego” (Rao 2020) wywołanego przez poli/permakryzys wymaga więc nie tylko praktycznych rozwiązań — konkretnych reform i wyboru nowych planów rozwoju – ale także modeli narracyjnych, pomocnych w konfrontacji i zrozumieniu teraźniejszości oraz unaocznianiu możliwych przyszłości.

**Słowa kluczowe:** współczesność; polikryzys; permakryzys; (globalny) upadek narracyjny; renarracja