Coming to Terms with a Crisis
Introduction

Martin Butler, Sina Farzin, Michael Fuchs and Fabian Hempel

"Describing Covid-19 as a crisis," Paul Frosh and Myria Georgiou note in an introduction to a special issue of the *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, is "a designation so obvious and unremarkable (unlike the pandemic itself) as to raise no difficulties: just as one can say 'the Covid pandemic' in everyday conversation, one can also say 'the Covid crisis' without provoking surprise or disagreement" (2022, 234). However, this understanding of COVID-19 having unleashed a crisis not only permeates everyday discourse: when browsing through academic publications on COVID-19, one does not have to search long to be confronted with various uses of 'crisis.' For example, in their introduction to *Sounds of the Pandemic*, Maurizio Agamennone, Daniele Palma, and Giulia Sarno proclaim the pandemic "a truly global crisis" that "has directly affected the lives of a large portion of the world's population within a short time and in homologous forms, by virtue of an unprecedented overlap between the speed of contagion, the spread of information through mass media channels, and the political, technological, and social responses" (2023, 2). Similarly, Tapas Kumas Koley and Monika Dhole maintain that "[t]he world was not ready to face such a crisis of such proportions" (2023, 1). However, few writers make explicit what crisis they refer to. Admittedly, three of us could be charged with having committed the same fallacy (Butler et al. 2021), as we have discussed Anthony Fauci and Christian Drosten as icons in times of crisis without clarifying what this crisis exactly is or what it implies.

As Frosh and Georgiou (2022) rightly point out, such an uncritical acceptance of COVID-19 as a crisis—that is, this naturalized assumption that COVID-19, as such, entails a crisis—asks for an exploration from the perspective of cultural studies. After all, a crisis does not precede its cultural construction; while any crisis produces a multitude of lived experiences, it is also a phenomenon that is culturally created; crises, Antoon De Rycker and Zuraidah Mohd Don maintain, are "socially produced and discursively constituted" (2013, 4).

Accordingly, an exploration of the constitution of COVID-19 'as crisis' from the perspective of cultural studies may start by unearthing the various denotations and connotations of the term 'crisis.' To be sure, its use in everyday parlance is different

from academic discourse. In addition, 'crisis' has various meanings. In our particular context, the common use of the term refers to "an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending," in particular "one with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome," to quote one of the definitions provided by *Merriam-Webster*. In the academic context, David Bidney provides a useful definition, as he considers a cultural crisis a moment of "disingetration, destruction or suspension of some basic elements of sociocultural life" (1946, 536). A "cultural crisis manifests itself as a state of emergency brought about by the suspension of normal, or previously prevailing, technological, social or ideological conditions," he continues and stresses that a crisis is "a state of transition, […] an unstable or passing condition" (1946, 537–38; original in italics). Without diving deeper for the moment, the implementation of stay-at-home orders, lockdowns, and quarantines during the COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly suspended life-as-we-knew-it and introduced a state of emergency. In addition, when conceiving of COVID-19 as a crisis, one might say it was a temporary event, possibly bracketed by the World Health Organization (WHO) declaring COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020, and ending the public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) on May 5, 2023.

In a second step, Bidney also explains that there are different types of crises, from theoretical crises in certain fields of science and/or the academy to survival crises; he usefully adds the distinction between crises that entail "practical emergencies," such as wars, and "axiological crises," which result "from cultural causes, such as the assumed incompatibility of two or more cultural systems or conflicting social interests" (1946, 542–43). For individuals, such axiological crises may also implicate actual life-or-death scenarios, but on a broader cultural scale, these crises are of a rather abstract nature. Whereas most of the crises afflicting and affecting the Global North in the years preceding COVID-19 were, arguably, primarily rendered in political and/or economic terms (the Great Recession, the migration crisis in Europe, the environmental crisis, etc.), COVID-19 was also decidedly framed as a survival crisis.[1] All of these (and more) dimensions are intimately and intricately entangled in our age, which COVID-19 brought to the fore. Writing several years before the outbreak of COVID-19, David Quammen noted that the increasing number of spillovers and the attendant outbreaks of new diseases "are not simply *happening* to us; they represent the unintended results of things we are *doing*. They reflect the convergence of two forms of crisis on our planet. The first crisis is ecological, the second is medical. […] Human-caused ecological pressures and disruptions are bringing animal pathogens ever more into contact with human populations, while

1 Of course, we do not mean to imply that human lives had not been at stake in those other crises, too.

human technology and behavior are spreading those pathogens ever more widely and quickly" (2012, 39).[2]

Since the WHO stopped labeling COVID-19 a PHEIC in May 2023 and since a growing number of experts in the field started considering it an endemic disease (e.g., Colarossi 2024; Jared 2023), the public attention to the virus has not only decreased significantly, but the discourse of crisis has also disappeared–or, rather, faded into what seems to be little more than the white noise of the current era's global polycrisis (see Lawrence et al. 2024). The rhetoric of emergency has vanished from headlines and talk shows. Policymakers are no longer confronted with an extraordinary situation that forces them to make ad-hoc decisions (McCoy 2023); instead, they negotiate adequate responses of public health systems to a now 'regular' infectious disease. Indeed, most of the safety measures have disappeared, and we have been witnessing an all-too-swift return to carelessness–which is considered a relief for most, while others do not get tired of emphasizing that "SARS-CoV-2 still has some pandemic-y features. It is still highly transmissible and circulating widely in countries around the world, and it remains a major cause of death and disability globally" (Ducharme 2024). In early 2024, the WHO even insisted that "[w]e're still in a pandemic," which had "just entered an endemic phase […]. COVID's not in the news every day, but it's still a global health risk" (Bartels 2024).

While scientific discourse and the public health sector are still (and probably will be for quite a long time) concerned with this limbo situation, and while there are still high death rates and innumerable long and post-COVID cases, in view of the public debate and overall media coverage, the emergency situation has come to an end. To be more precise: the narrative of crisis has largely been replaced by one of normalization, with the discursive turn from pandemic to endemic state serving as an appropriate 'ending.' In other words, what for the first two and a half years of the pandemic had served as a "pandemic illness narrative"–i.e., "a public narrative (that) draws on a communal set of stock narratives to tell its story […,] allow(ing) people to make meaning out of a collective historical event together" (McCoy 2023)–does not seem to be functional anymore. This might be due to some "narrative fatigue […] born not only out of the relentlessness of the pandemic but the relentlessness of the ever-changing narratives that have accompanied it" (Mark Freeman qtd. in Pinsker 2022). It might also be due to the fact that such a narrative does no longer relate

2 In this context, it seems interesting that Bidney differentiated cultural from natural crises. Natural crises are "more or less beyond human control" (1946, 537; original in italics). Phenomena such as "floods, storms, earthquakes, drought, etc., tend to disrupt cultural routine and to produce states of emergency requiring desperate measures. Although the number and extent of such natural crises tend to diminish with the progress of science, there are always bound to be the inevitable biological crises which are an inherent part of our mortal nature as well as environmental catastrophes against which there can be no certain protection" (1946, 537).

to the everyday life experience of people, which is indeed felt to have gone back to established patterns and routines (McCoy 2023).

But it was not only the human body that was in crisis during the pandemic. With it, entire systems of health care and prevention were put under enormous stress. The strain put on medical systems, in turn, exposed a multitude of other crises (related to labor rights, politics, hospital infrastructure, supply chains, understaffing, and others). For instance, what in many countries turned into a 'governing through decrees and executive orders' revealed a crisis in governance. Moreover, the large-scale closures of businesses led to an economic crisis. At the same time, the suspension of international travel and cessation of business-as-usual seemed to provide temporary respite to a world confronted with an environmental crisis (which, to draw on Quammen, caused–or at least contributed to–the evolution of the new virus in the first place). From a sociological perspective, it is these simultaneous, disruptive effects on every aspect of social life that constituted the pandemic as crisis. Not only the medical threat, but the overarching refiguration of social routines and institutions shaped the critical moment. After all, "[p]roblems become crises […] only when they move outside their own spheres and appear to endanger society at large" (Alexander 2019, 3). This process of what Jeffrey Alexander calls 'societalization' occurs when discursive and material resources are mobilized across different social spheres in response.

The diagnosis of the multiplicity of crises both constituted by and constituting the pandemic is revealing in at least two respects. First, it hints at the many different layers on which COVID-19 contributed to irritating taken-for-granted knowledge and practices, paving the way for pandemic illness narratives as sense-making tools in view of utter incomprehensibility. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the identification of a multiplicity of crises is indicative of the (specifically modern) conception that crisis is not an exception, but the rule (Koselleck 1973). In this sense, COVID-19 could be characterized as "a meta-crisis, a crisis-event which makes visible modernity's general historical character as a perpetual crisis-condition" (Frosh and Georgiou 2022, 240; emphases removed). Accordingly, the state of emergency is set as default, and 'crisis' is increasingly perceived to be a mode of living that requires new strategies of resilience and adaptation in view of phenomena such as anthropogenic climate change and novel viral diseases and their pandemic spread. In this vein, Helmut Draxler suggests conceptualizing crisis as a "specific historical form" that modern societies draw on as a "particular mode of cultural self-conception and self-assurance" (2017, 231).[3] Accordingly, crisis as a form provides a framework for meaning-making and identity formation, and not least for the legitimization of political interventions. Without denying the harsh realities of COVID-19, such an understanding of crisis may help emphasize the mutually constitutive relationship be-

3 All translations of sources in languages other than English are by the authors of this chapter.

tween the pandemic's material realities and its symbolic representation; it helps unravel the cultural performativity of the multiple illness narratives and the various ways of storytelling employed to render the pandemic intelligible.

In this sense, COVID-19–as a period of intertwined and overlapping crises–was indeed brought to an end culturally through a story of progress, which, as Dora Vargha (2016) puts it, regularly tends to "overwrite the ones of failure, of anonymous loss." Likewise, its beginning was also marked by a range of different forms of cultural engagements–articulated in different media and distributed through different channels in different contexts while (co-)producing the situation of (perceived) crises. The pandemic, then, can be considered a nascent event shaped through various forms of cultural representation and performance across different media. Its narrativization in different cultural practices and forms of expression, which, as this volume illustrates, drew on a range of different topoi, symbols, metaphors, and figures, as well as on their media-specific aesthetics–from 'outbreak' scenarios to its 'endemification.'

Our volume adds to the growing corpus of anthologies and collections of essays, of special issues and monographs that deal with cultural ways of engaging with the pandemic (e.g., Bruzzi and Biriotti 2022; Damrosch 2022; Ramírez Blanco and Spampinato 2023; Urban et al. 2021). Through its case studies, which cover different media, regions, and national contexts, it contributes to highlighting the diversity of forms of cultural expression and practice that emerged (or were revived) during the COVID years, while at the same time unraveling their context-specificity. The book results from a workshop held in the spring of 2022 as the closing event of a one-year subproject ("Pandemic Meets Fiction," 2021–22) of the interdisciplinary research group "Fiction Meets Science," which explored the complex relationship between science and society through cultural forms of representation (e.g., Farzin et al. 2021). During the pandemic, this complexity became particularly visible when the various ways of (ab)using scientific expertise in society, the diverse challenges of communicating research results, and the manifold connections and influences between science and other dimensions of social life, such as politics and the media, came to the surface in a perhaps unprecedented degree and temporal dynamic. "Pandemic Meets Fiction" examined cultural engagements with the pandemic as they appeared, ranging from memes of scientists in social media (Butler et al. 2021) and songs and music videos (Marini and Fuchs 2022) to late-night television (Butler and Fuchs 2025), alongside the examples of fiction, visual representations, and news media included in this volume. It allowed us to observe illness narratives in the making; to describe and analyze processes of their coming-into-being within the social dynamics of a (perceived) crisis; and to analyze the ways in which other forms of cultural expression served to, or were used as, means of grappling with the uncanniness of the pandemic.

The sub-project's closing workshop combined academic contributions from different disciplines and a screening of select episodes of the television docuseries *Charité Intensiv: Station 43* (ARD, 2021), which centers on a COVID-19 ward during the winter months of 2020–2021, accompanied by a discussion with the show's writers, Mareike Müller and Carl Gierstorfer. Like so many events, the workshop was moved to a remote format due to rising infection numbers in Germany during the first half of 2022. Accordingly, researchers and artists gave their presentations in a situation that was still evolving and shaped everyone's daily experience beyond specific scholarly or artistic interests. Since then, the observations and ideas about the cultural impact of COVID-19 have been elaborated on, discussed, and revised, thus being turned into the chapters of this volume.

The exploration of cultural engagements with COVID-19 starts with Małgorzata Sugiera's analysis of Lawrence Wright's report *The Plague Year* (2021), which reflects on the first year of COVID-19 in the US. She approaches the book as a prism to explore recent critical theories of contagious diseases in view of COVID-19, focusing on three dimensions: the futurity of pandemics, the historically changing connections between immunology and ideology in the formation of identities, and new perspectives on viruses and their material dimensions. In so doing, her contribution unravels the poetics and politics of epi- and pandemic imaginaries; how they become manifest in different media and genres with the help of metaphorical and narrative figures and tropes (such as the 'virus,' the 'outbreak narrative,' and the 'simulation'), thus acknowledging the world-making potential of these imaginaries in relation to other global challenges of the present (such as anthropogenic climate change). Eventually, Sugiera identifies how pandemics induce changes in our knowledge systems.

Michael Fuchs and Martin Butler's chapter focuses on the CDC illustration of SARS-CoV-2 as a weird icon of both the COVID-19 pandemic and the Anthropocene. After introducing the biomedical realities that the 3D illustration tries to capture and a brief sketch of how and why the depiction of SARS-Cov-2 went viral, the chapter turns to the aesthetics of the illustrations. The design taps into science-fictional tropes to capture the strangeness of the pandemic experience and to evoke cosmic dread in view of how the Anthropocene epitomizes the idea of connectedness, including the entanglements between viruses and humans.

Ingrid Gessner is concerned with ways of commemorating the pandemic. In her chapter, she takes a closer look at COVID-19 memorial projects and examines how they both draw on and modify the well-established repertoire of forms and items of commemoration. Based on an incredibly extensive archive of memorials (both implemented and in planning), Gessner continues her work on "trajectories of commemoration," which is "set into motion after crises that cause traumatic experiences" and which she originally identified in relation to 9/11 commemoration culture. Gessner incorporates different memorial constellations, ranging from (ephemeral) collective shrines via temporary installations and exhibitions

to permanent memorials to illustrate the interplay of the different temporalities inscribed into a highly dynamic social situation, on the one hand, and a memorial's implication of durability, on the other, and how the global, often digital experience of COVID-19 impacted commemoration culture.

Similarly, Yvonne Völkl is interested in how the pandemic was chronicled as it happened. Yet, her focus is not so much on explicit media of commemoration but on the historicizing potential of anthologies. To be precise, she analyzes francophone and hispanophone COVID-19 anthologies, all compiled during the first lockdown, scrutinizing how the editors frame their specific motivations for their anthologizing efforts while identifying the major topics, generic features, and narrative perspectives that characterize these anthologies. In so doing, her contribution interrogates a specific form of cultural sense-making and, perhaps more importantly, of archiving the pandemic through the medium of the literature anthology.

Sina Farzin and Fabian Hempel examine how references to fiction became a prominent feature in the quality press throughout the pandemic, especially during its first phase. Conceptualizing references to fiction as a discursive practice of meaning-making and coping with insecurity and uncertainty as the pandemic in its epistemological and cultural formation was constantly in the making, they do so by exploring the thematic and communicative features of such references in a text corpus consisting of pandemic-related articles primarily from the feuilleton, arts and culture, and political sections of select German, British, and US newspapers of record. One way of grappling with the pandemic was to hope and wait for the scientific breakthrough that would eventually provide humankind with a recipe to develop a vaccine and co-exist with the virus.

Anton Kirchhofer sheds light on this way of 'coming to terms with the crisis' through anticipation, as he scrutinizes the production and distribution of what he calls 'breakthrough narratives' in the public discourse on science during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. In his contribution, he analyzes different variations of these narratives, asks for the agents and media involved in their production and circulation, and examines their potential functions and effects. In so doing, he shows how breakthrough coverage, even though it constituted a highly contested field, indeed provided stories that helped make sense of the precarious situation.

Whereas Kirchhofer's analysis of breakthrough coverage focuses on the public discourse on science, Till Hilmar, Rocco Paolillo, and Patrick Sachweh turn to public debates around what is commonly referred to as 'zombie firms' during the first two years of the pandemic. In their comparative analysis of a selection of German and Italian newspapers, they trace the ideological implications of the trope of the 'zombie,' which, specifically in times that could quite easily be rendered in postapocalyptic terms, lends itself to epitomizing the 'illness' of society. They show how 'zombie' as a denominator charged with a range of implications and connotations revolving

around the notion of contagion was employed to negotiate and to both legitimize and criticize state interventions in the economic sector during the pandemic.

Within the heated public debate on COVID, its effects, and ways to defeat it, some voices were louder than others, some even remained unheard; information was spread unevenly, and access to it was not granted to everyone. When vaccinations started, this lack of information led to additional insecurities and unrest. Starting from this observation, Anna Marta Marini's chapter explores the role of popular cultural forms of expression in creating an awareness of the importance of vaccination among marginalized Latinx communities. Her analysis focuses on the Chicano cartoon artist Lalo Alcaraz and his role in vaccination campaigns. It shows how his works address the pandemic both through the prism of Latinx cultural traditions and in view of the structural violence against ethnic communities through institutionalized discrimination, which became particularly visible in the course of the emergency situation caused by COVID-19.

Indeed, the pandemic highlighted inequalities along the lines of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. And it equally highlighted the fact that political apparatuses were overwhelmed by a challenge of this proportion. In the United States, the Trump administration desperately tried to orchestrate, at least rhetorically, a myriad of measures to manage COVID-19. Trump himself, as Sara Polak shows in her contribution, benefited from this somewhat chaotic situation, as it catered to what she calls 'fuck-up-ability'–that is, "the possibility of acting that allowed him to spectacularly and cartoonishly mess up 'serious' politics and management of a public health crisis." The chaos of COVID-19, she argues, fit Trump's erratic political 'style' and provided him with a number of affordances he could employ for the staging of his persona.

In the first few months after the outbreak of COVID-19, it seemed as if the indeterminacy and unclearness of the lockdown experience could best be digested by resorting to stories that were already available and could be used to frame the unprecedented. Alena Cicholewski turns to this mode of 'coming to terms with the crisis.' In her essay on Christina Henry's 2019 novel *The Girl in Red*, she argues that a re-reading of Henry's horror story of a pandemic and its aftermath against the backdrop of COVID-19 allowed readers to use the novel as a frame of reference to make sense of the disintegration of everyday lives they faced. *The Girl in Red* is thus among those cultural representations that, albeit written or produced before the pandemic spread around the globe, bore a strong affective potential when re-read or re-watched shortly after its outbreak–such as Steven Soderbergh's 2011 movie *Contagion*, views of which skyrocketed early in 2020, and Albert Camus's classic *The Plague* (1947), which also had a 'comeback' that year.

Assuming that COVID-19 both deconstructed and reinforced the cultural idea of science's autonomy and social responsibility as its functional imperatives, Fabian Hempel draws on four works of pandemic fiction to rethink aspects of the social and epistemic constraints of science that the pandemic made visible. His readings of Al-

bert Camus's *The Plague*, Lawrence Wright's *The End of October* (2021), Orhan Pamuk's *Nights of Plague* (2021), and Ashoke Mukhopadhyay's *A Ballad of Remittent Fever* (2018) emphasize the struggles of scientists and medical professionals to understand the depicted disease outbreaks and how their interactions with other social institutions shape their ability to contribute to the broader societal response.

As Jim Scown, Keir Waddington, and Martin Willis show in the final chapter of this volume, the pandemic also served as a breeding ground for a number of future narratives inspired by the experience of what was felt to be an existential crisis. These narratives, different in their medial shapes and in their ideological underpinnings, set out to provide answers to the question of how to conceive of and live in a post-pandemic world, and how to face other (but related) global challenges such as anthropogenic climate change and a dramatically changing world of work, not least in view of what is often felt to be an unhinged spread of neoliberal capitalism. From a critical future studies perspective, then, their chapter adds to the understanding of the pandemic experience as a catalyst boosting the production of scenarios of and for the future.

Whether or not these future scenarios will help prepare for a next pandemic remains to be seen. Considering the speed and understandable relief at which people returned to their everyday lives, one may also doubt that there will be a close examination of the many social, economic, and political dynamics that this period unfolded or amplified. Since then, other global emergencies have (re-)emerged and attracted public attention, causing COVID-19 to fade into the background. In view of this collective forgetfulness, we believe, it is all the more important to archive the cultural forms of coming to terms with COVID-19.

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