

# SENSIBILITY AND SEMIO-CAPITALISM – A BODILY EXPERIENCE OF CRISIS IN URSULA ANDKJÆR OLSEN'S *THE CRISIS NOTEBOOKS*

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## ABSTRACT

In *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (2012), Franco 'Bifo' Berardi unfolds a political and clinical diagnosis of contemporary society, stating that the crisis we experience today is a permanent state of absent social autonomy and political agency. This crisis is not solely economic but is caused by semio-capitalism impacting all spheres of human life, affecting sensibility in particular—the linguistic and physical-sensuous link between the individual and the world.

Taking up the term sensibility as a bodily basis of experience and as an aesthetic notion, in this article I will explore the relation between individual and collective bodies, the crisis as a suspension of change, and literature, focusing on the Danish poet Ursula Andkjær Olsen's 2017 lunatic and fragmented novel of love and economy *The Crisis Notebooks*, but also with reference to some of her other work(s). I argue that the bodily experience of crisis, as expressed in this novel, leads to an inhibited social sensibility but also, paradoxically, to a radical openness towards the world. With reference to the Danish literary scholar Anne Fastrup's interpretation of French vitalism's idea of sensibility in *The Movement of Sensibility* (2007), I suggest that a more ambiguous, material notion of both a constructive and a destructive sensibility is crucial for its understanding, and hence—for an understanding of the relationship between body and crisis as expressed in *The Crisis Notebooks*.

Finally, I suggest that an aesthetic notion of sensibility can provide a prism through which relations between today's financial mechanisms and a sociocultural experience of crisis are rendered visible—if not sensuous—and it is from here that alternatives to the crisis can be found, felt, formulated or fabulated.

## KEYWORDS

Finance, Sensibility, Semio-capitalism, Crisis, Body, Ursula Andkjær Olsen

I've become one who wishes to postpone the critical moment, hold my breath, hold back, drag everything out, one who fears the crisis, the one who fears it the most (...) In addition: The displacement of the critical moment into an inner phenomenon, that moment, there where it happens, there where this happens as a radical transformation of the brain/heart.<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

In her 2017 lunatic, ruptured and rambling novel of love and economy, with its significant three-part title: *The Crisis Notebooks. Pandora Blue Box. The Atlantis Syndrome*,<sup>2</sup> the acclaimed and extraordinary Danish poet and author Ursula Andkjær Olsen presents a fragmented and frustrating contemporary condition of interconnected physical, personal and global crises. Departing from the ancient Greek myth of Pandora's box, the novel establishes an underlying narrative structure of mythological crisis, which is reflected, rewritten and challenged as the novel unfolds. As the above quotation suggests, however, there is something significant in this experience of crisis in the novel: an absence of a critical turning point, a dragging out, unrestrained fabulation and a bated breath, which seem to articulate the crisis as a temporally extended condition affecting the material body.

This bodily experience of crisis as a chronic condition, I contend, is not only a focal point in Andkjær's novel, but it also indicates a (shifting, elusive, sometimes hidden) relationship between the finance economy and its material underpinnings. A symptomatic experience and a relation, which appears as an expression of more general conditions of aesthetic production and literary representation in the contemporary moment of finance capitalism. This problematic relation is also to be found in Swedish author Andrzej Tichý's 2013 novel *Kairos* and in Olsen's previous works such as the poetry collections 2012 *Third-Millennium Heart*, translated into English in 2017 and the 2015 *Outgoing vessel*,<sup>3</sup> both of which orbit around an economic body, its interior and exterior transactions, motherhood, abortion, society, economy and gender, and all their interrelations.

I want to accentuate this intricate intersection of crisis, finance capitalism and the material and literary corpus, as it opens up fresh critical perspectives on the financialization that has happened since the 1970s.<sup>4</sup> In this article, I thus want to offer an initial exploration of this intersection—of the crisis as one result of the operations of finance capitalism, the psychosomatic body, and its literary representations—through the concept of

*sensibility*, as both a bodily basis of experience and an aesthetic notion. This approach, wherein I argue that the interconnections between aesthetics and finance, literature and crisis, and language and capital can be revealed and explored through the concept of sensibility, renders possible a critical examination of the operations of finance capital in areas which are not explicitly situated within the vast sphere of the finance economy. That is to say, a focus on sensibility is also a way to insist on materiality which is not only neglected at this neoliberal historical moment, but also often seems—intentionally or unintentionally—to be somewhat overlooked in the field of Critical Finance Studies (which of course is subjected to those same conditions it criticizes). Thus, it is my hope that this tentative reorientation of focus, as a concurrent trajectory within the field, towards sensibility might also embody other and—what I in lack of the right words will call—more modest forms of agency, ideas of resistance, or simply, vulnerable and insurgent alternatives to the state of things.

In keeping with Frederic Jameson's statement that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism,<sup>5</sup> the Italian post-Marxist thinker Franco 'Bifo' Berardi presents a political and clinical diagnosis of contemporary Western society in his 2012 publication *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance*. He argues that the crisis experienced today is not solely a result of the 2007-2008 economic breakdown, but must also be conceived as a crisis in the social imagination about the future.<sup>6</sup> Where crisis historically referred to a problematic situation of change or a turning point, the crisis of the contemporary conjuncture, Berardi contends, is characterized instead by an absence of social autonomy and political agency. Viewing the European uprisings of 2011 as desperate and aggressive reactions to the precarious circumstances caused by the financial collapse, he notes how neither a global protest movement nor the failure of the economic system have led to any fundamental changes of the course of things.<sup>7</sup> This apparent suspension of change leads Berardi to reconsider the nature of the idea of crisis. He argues that all crises at this point in history, be they economic, ecological, geopolitical or humanitarian, are neither to be considered as delimited nor as decisive turning points. Rather, they constitute one permanent *condition* of crisis, a postponement of the critical turning points, which he comprehends as a sociocultural crisis in the social and political imagination; a dysfunction in the individual and collective ability to create solidary relations and communities as the basis for imagining and, thus, shaping the future.<sup>8</sup>

This sociocultural crisis, Berardi argues, is not only economic but it *is* caused by the present economic mechanisms of the finance economy. He argues that these economic circumstances have altered the social reality since they have alienated the human being from its perceptive, sensuous and social body, and in particular, they have affected the *sensibility*: a term Berardi uses to describe the linguistic and physical-sensuous link between the individual and the world.<sup>9</sup> Despite the universalizing manoeuvres of Berardi's analysis in articulating an *us* and the human being *as such*, the term sensibility is particularly interesting as it offers a double perspective: not only it establishes a relationship between specific historic economic circumstances and their psycho-somatic consequences, but it is also a primary aesthetic feature. To him, aesthetics is characterized by the investigation and representation of the impressionability of sensitive surfaces: "Actually," writes Berardi, "aesthetics is the science dedicated to the study of contact between the derma (the skin, the sensitive surface of our body-mind) and different chemical, physical, electromagnetic, and informal-flows."<sup>10</sup> Therefore, I claim that the sensibility, the bodily experience of crisis, represented in *The Crisis Notebooks*, allows me to conceive of the novel itself as a sensitive surface of contact, one which reflects and responds to a contemporary experience of crisis. It is this contention that I shall seek to expand upon in this article.

According to Berardi, the primary reason for the contemporary condition of crisis is the change over the last 50 years from industrial capitalism to finance- and semio-capitalism. One of the most crucial events in this regard was Nixon's 1971 abolition of the gold standard and the Bretton Woods agreement,<sup>11</sup> which Berardi describes as actions of dereferencialization, since the value of the dollar lost its connection to a physical reality.<sup>12</sup> This may appear as an excessive conclusion, but it nevertheless aligns with other theoreticians in and outside the field, including Marazzi,<sup>13</sup> MacKenzie<sup>14</sup> and Appadurai.<sup>15</sup> as it stresses the performative and immaterial character of finance capitalism. Berardi refers to this self-referential economic paradigm as *semio-capitalism*, since the primary production is not based on physical things but rather the exchange of semia—signs: "There are no longer material things, but signs; no longer the production of things which are tangible visible materials, but the production of something that is essentially semiotic."<sup>16</sup>

Following this argumentation, in the present age of digital semio-capitalism the spheres of production and language would

seem to coincide, resulting in the abstraction of work which is increasingly based on cognitive labour and the immaterial exchange of information. These accelerating processes alienate—whom he designates as—‘the cognitive workers’ from their social, perceptive and affective bodies. Furthermore, in his 2015 book *AND. Phenomenology of the End - Sensibility and Connective Mutation* Berardi states that “the infosphere acts directly on the nervous system of society, affecting the psychosphere and affecting sensibility in particular,”<sup>17</sup> emphasizing how the accelerating infosphere, the dimension of intentional signs surrounding the sensitive organism, affects sensibility.<sup>18</sup> As stated above, Berardi conceptualizes this sensibility as the surface of contact between the human being and the world; a sensuous, affective and linguistic attentiveness, receptiveness and capacity for interpretation and comprehension crucial for the social organism to interact with itself and the surrounding world.<sup>19</sup> However, this sensibility is inhibited by the semio-capitalist rationalization of language, which becomes operational, standardized and thus exchangeable, so to minimize friction in the still accelerating exchange of information and immaterial value.<sup>20</sup> For him, this paradigm of semio-capitalism pervades all spheres of human life, and thus inhibits the ability to understand, express, imagine and create different relations and conjunctions—or alternative futures, if you like.

My interest here is how the contemporary condition of permanent crisis, as outlined by Berardi, can be understood as a crisis in sensibility. Although Berardi, in his eclectic way, engages with a broad spectrum of the affective, cognitive, linguistic, semiotic, techno-digital aspects of sensibility in his diagnosis of contemporary society, to which this introduction doesn’t do justice, he tends to neglect the concrete material and bodily aspects of crisis, which can be said to be both a premise for and bear the consequences of finance/semio-capitalism. Furthermore, he would seem to ignore specific historic-geographic experiences in his universalising sketches. Nevertheless, I find the notion of sensibility useful because it infers the exact opposite of his statement “there are no longer material things (...)” and clears the way for a bodily experience of crisis, a materiality also affected by the workings of finance/semio-capitalism. With its double gesture, the notion of sensibility offers both a way to render other aspects of the contemporary financialized conjuncture perceptible and an analytical method to approach works like Olsen’s *The Crisis Notebooks*, which is both a representation

and a consequence of the crisis. It is thus not my intention to diminish the affective, cognitive, linguistic or semiotic aspects of Berardi's analysis, but to stress the that crisis *also* has a bodily and material dimension, which an analysis of a work like *The Crisis Notebooks* can help unfold and challenge, precisely because it articulates both specific and collective bodily experiences in an all-embracing condition of crisis.

#### THE SOCIAL SENSIBILITY:

##### EVERYTHING AND NOTHING IS CONNECTED

*The Crisis Notebooks'* barely coherent plot concerns a romantic break-up and its emotional aftershock: A semi-mythological woman, Pandora, who is employed in Copenhagen's contemporary private sector, has been left by a man named Romeo just prior to the beginning of the novel. However, the plot can be described more accurately as a porous web of thoughts, feelings and untamed associations, which unfolds through first person reminiscences, vertical homespun philosophical statements, poems and numbered lists. The text is a collection of dreams, mythology, past, present and possible actions, which constantly interpret and reinterpret the narrative fragments. This disrupted form could appear unsettling to a literary analysis; for every conclusion one arrives at, the exact opposite would be just as valid. However, it simultaneously creates a strange social ontology: the plot is temporally and spatially disjointed, and instead of being set within a logical time and space or causality, it unfolds in a myriad of connections and relations, constantly finding new ways to interconnect. The effect is one of an all-embracing condition of crisis in which Pandora's emotional state is further linked to local and global crises: "Given that the world is not *one*, but a farrago of beings (organisms), there is not one crisis, one critical moment, but a string, an eternal string."<sup>21</sup>

*The Crisis Notebooks* as an eternal string of crises in every sphere, nevertheless, seems to refer to a passage which frames an inherent relationship between crisis and physical experience. In the fourth notebook, the relationship between Pandora and Romeo is laid out as a pastiche of the myth of Pandora's box, in which an intriguing parallel between body and box is drawn: "Pandora opened the body, she shouldn't have done that, it's not true. It was not a coincidence (that she did it)."<sup>22</sup>

However, unlike the original myth, wherein misfortune and crisis are *let out* into the world when the box is opened, the reverse

is true in Olsen's text in which crisis seems to *enter* Pandora's body. Pandora describes how she used to live in a wordless realm of deep forests and high mountains, until she met Romeo from "the land of bridges and passages, where everything is exchange, exchangeable."<sup>23</sup> Romeo enters the picture with his "methods, technics and blonde locks,"<sup>24</sup> as another Prometheus, and seduces her with words that subvert her harmonically closed circuit and breaks everything to pieces.<sup>25</sup> As the romantic relationship unfolds, Romeo increasingly seems to be an economic rationality entering Pandora's organic body; as a semio-capitalist system of words, transactions, and infrastructure being inscribed into the material body; as an inner architecture of bridges and passages, making everything exchangeable:<sup>26</sup> And in there, the break-up, the relational collapse, the economic crash happens, in an immense entanglement of emotional and economic states of crisis. "How did it get in here," Pandora asks at one point, "I don't know."<sup>27</sup>

It might be limiting to read Romeo as an allegory of finance capitalism—but the pastiche frames a general turn in the mythical direction of the motion of crisis in the novel, wherein the crisis of the financial economy takes place within Pandora's body, leaving her with an alienated sense of embodiment. One of numerous examples is this contradictory quote:

Mankind, we are the habitat for capital, it paralyzes us to be a habitat for something else, we lie down and let the capitalism move upon us, in us, via us, we lie completely still. Or the immovability of the market society, it can't be changed, apparently it can't be changed, instead the humans, we, who live in it, we have to change with steadily increasingly haste, improve ourselves, educate ourselves, become faster, stronger, better, with steadily increasingly haste.<sup>28</sup>

Throughout the novel Pandora tries to explain her bodily condition with all sorts of clinical diagnoses from depression, anxiety, and stress to midlife crisis and social phobia. This myriad of pathological conditions refers to widely differing altered bodily experiences, but all imply a distance from social reality. In a novel where everything seems to be internally connected to everything else this appears as a conspicuous social dysfunction. This distance is expressed through descriptions of Pandora's anatomy as hollow, empty, as a border between the outer world and her inner abyss.

(...) When i'm in the company of other people, i really make an effort to be right underneath the skin, i settle myself there right under the skin, so that i can see through the eyes, hear, everything which, i do everything i can to stay there, a place we share, the surfaces, what am i to do (...)29

It is intriguing to see how the body's sensitive surface—the skin, the eyes, the ears—becomes the condition for a common social reality, and how the material body affected by the workings of capital prevents Pandora from connecting to her sensitive surfaces, so causing an inhibited social sensibility. It seems like the sensibility portrayed here is not only one way of social interaction but a fundamental premise for a shared reality. The sensibility presented in the novel thus shares similarities with Berardi's argument regarding how an inhibited social sensibility can be viewed as the result of the workings of financial rationalism. However, the obstinate ambiguity of the novel also seems to suggest the exact opposite: That there is something problematic about being interconnected to the world. That a sensitive openness towards the world makes the body exposed and vulnerable to outside impressions:

“This shitty situation, now I am uneasy, am fucked, I see this riddled wing of an insect, leaf, something, it is organic, riddled, very unsettled image/feeling, the feeling is: Everything can intrude, can run out,”30

Pandora blurts out at one point, indicating an aspect of sensibility which Berardi's notion of sensibility does not seem to imply, that is: being connected to the world can be a 'shitty situation.' Thus, it is clear that the all-embracing, intertwined condition of crisis in *The Crisis Notebooks* is experienced through the body, distorting the sensitive possibility for creating a shared reality. But at the same time, one might speculate, whether or not sensibility, as the basis of experience, is not part of the crisis itself?

#### AN AMBIVALENT SENSIBILITY: BEING LEFT TO THE NERVES

Because of this paradox I turn to the work of the Danish literary scholar Anne Fastrup, and particularly to her reflections on the French vitalism of the eighteenth century and its physiological idea of sensibility in *The Movement of Sensibility* (2007).31 Fastrup's concept of sensibility, derived from her readings of the French philosopher, writer, and editor Denis Diderot, is based on



a more biological understanding of a perceptive, somatic body as a sentient, nerve-like membrane between the individual and the world.<sup>32</sup> Despite the anachronism of the following paragraph, I contend that this vitalist-physiological aspect of sensibility is relevant to my analysis because it suggests an ambivalence within sensibility itself, emphasizing a more dysfunctional aspect of sensibility, which Berardi's notion does not capture. I maintain that including Fastrup's notion of dysfunctional sensibility will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the bodily experience of crisis as expressed in *The Crisis Notebooks*.

Instead of conceiving sensibility only as the literary trend of eighteenth century sentimental emotionalism, Fastrup highlights it as a focal point in the development of medical science and especially in the vitalist physiology, a part of a bodily-material turn in the 1700s, a movement which, along with empiricism and materialism, dismissed the Cartesian dualistic distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, by envisioning the physical, sensing body as the fundamental basis for understanding of the human being.<sup>33</sup> Thus, Fastrup points out, sensibility was in this tradition both a somatic, biological and psychological phenomenon, which must be more broadly understood as a "sensory faculty, sense of touch, sensitivity and vitality in psychological and biological sense."<sup>34</sup>

In focusing on Diderot's *homme sensible*, as his conception of the general intellectual movements of the eighteenth century, Fastrup stresses sensibility as the body's vital force: the impressionability of the nerves, fibres and organs, which in a complex network of actions and reactions connects the human with the surrounding world, the physical with the physiological and the single limbs with the body as a whole.<sup>35</sup> This sensibility, she argues, is a cohesive principle, implying an optimistic notion of the constructive forces in the human body which allows the human being to be a co-creator of the social, linguistic and political context that surrounds it.<sup>36</sup>

Fastrup's interpretation of Diderot's and French vitalism's idea of sensibility, might appear as a precursor of Berardi's term, but where Berardi's sensibility appears solely to imply a positive potential for conjunction and change—which can be inhibited by exterior conditions—Fastrup's notion maintains a duality within itself. On the one hand, it designates a constructive force, a vital cohesion, but on the other, it also contains the risk of destructive alienation. By broadening the notion to include this

more dysfunctional aspect of sensibility, ways of understanding the bodily experience of crisis become more varied, as it also suggests that sensibility can be problematic in itself: exactly because it implies a physiology which predisposes the body to outside impressions. Sensibility thus also contains a risk of overstimulation; a dysfunction of the nervous system can make the body fall apart, Fastrup contends, thereby emphasizing that with sensibility as a condition of life the human being is always threatened by a loss of identity, alienation or fragmentation.<sup>37</sup>

This dysfunctional flipside of sensibility itself seems to be omitted in Berardi's notion. Furthermore, this concept both contains and exceeds Berardi's primarily immaterial idea of a social sensibility and anchors it in the materiality of the somatic body. As such, it encapsulates more accurately the paradoxical modes of sensibility that appear in *The Crisis Notebooks*, whereby Pandora in becoming a habitat for capital, feels both hollow and distanced from her social surroundings and at the same time senses the uncontrollable openness of her sensitive body. Moreover, a dysfunctional sensibility offers a theoretical space for understanding the so-called 'shitty situations' where Pandora is left to her own nerves, resulting from the circumstances of the dysfunctional sensibility of the material body itself.

#### CRISIS MANAGEMENT OR ESCAPING SENSIBILITY

As a reaction to this problematic sensibility, both Pandora in *Pandora Blue Box* and the first-person narrator of *The Atlantis Syndrome*, make innumerable attempts to get rid of their sensitive bodies:

“(...) we should abolish the parasympathetic nervous system, and everything associated with it, as digestion, rest, sleep, things like that, and put focus on the sympathetic nervous system (...) and its far more production- and performance oriented areas of action,”<sup>38</sup>

Pandora states at one point. Thereafter, she tries to solve this problematic by consciously inhibiting her own sensibility by pursuing the idea of an impervious body or a “hard surface”. Using all imaginable processes of encapsulation, entrenchment, armoring, chromium plating and surface treatments with chemical solvent, Rexona, or plastic,<sup>39</sup> Pandora seems to try to adjust to the condition of crisis by creating an indifferent sense of embodiment. This inhibition of sensibility culminates in a

passage in *The Atlantis Syndrome* where the anonymous narrator, realizing its incapability to change the outer world from the inside, resolves to change its own interiority itself instead by training to become a new human, over-human, non-human; an anaerobe-being in the shape of a germ, a bacteria, a hybrid or a crystal.<sup>40</sup> At this point in the novel a whole new humanity, or that is, inhumanity, is called for by the narrator. The expectation of a fully anaerobic, crystallized, non-being, seems to be a performance of complete adaption to the condition of crisis—which goes further than the previous expressions of a positive social sensibility inhibited by the outer world, or a dysfunctional sensibility, which in itself is problematic and thus needs to be inhibited; but a cynical, crystalline existence, which has dismissed all sensible relations to the outer world, and is thus unable to experience the condition of crisis, as it has given up the basis of experience itself. If the crisis is thus to be conceived of as a suspension of change, as a condition of paralysis, the insensitive existence presented in *The Atlantis Syndrome* appears to extend this crisis. By accepting the inability to change the world, the loss of social and political agency, the narrator gives up on the idea of any intervention in the crisis. By dismissing any forms of sensibility, the insensible non-being's apparent lack of need to change anything thus becomes part of the political problem itself, as it contributes yet further to the condition of crisis.

*The Crisis Notebooks*, therefore, appears to outline three kinds of sensibility, which I've touched upon in this article: The inhibited, the dysfunctional, and the non-existent. They constitute three relations between the body and crisis; a bodily experience of crisis; a body which in itself is the cause of the experience of crisis, and a denial of body that, because it no longer experiences *as such*, only enforces the permanent state of crisis.

As a literary expression of a historic, contemporary experience of crisis, the analysed content of *The Crisis Notebooks* falls short of putting forward a relationship between the body and the crisis that renders any distinctive, optimistic potential for change possible. But what then? How to think sensibility, materiality and collectivity under these economic circumstances? How to maintain life and a social connection to other people and to the world, if neither a receptive openness nor an armoured closedness are valid solutions?

#### THE AESTHETIC SENSIBILITY?

As mentioned in the introduction, the notion of sensibility becomes

relevant exactly because it can be used as a prism through which the relations between the financial mechanisms of today and a sociocultural experience of crisis can be rendered visible—if not sensuous. The focus on materiality, the materiality of the body and the represented experience of the materiality of the body, becomes a way to frame, comprehend and perhaps, feel more concretely the intersections of a socio-historic cultural experience and an abstract economic system of financial mechanisms and structures. The analytical sensitivity to sensibility thus creates the foundation for a critical examination of the interconnections and interactions of crisis, capital and body, as well as enabling other ways of approaching both literature and critical finance studies, since this approach can include other bodies or other materialities than those which are usually represented in these fields of research. And thus, as also mentioned, it is my hope that this tentative conceptual and analytical movement towards sensibility might be a transition which renders other kinds of agency, resistance, uprisings or much less ostentatious alternative forms possible. However, taking my analysis of *The Crisis Notebooks* as an example, the represented sensibility does not at all seem to offer any kinds of alternatives.

This is where sensibility becomes interesting as an aesthetic notion. Even though Berardi's diagnosis of contemporary society in *The Uprising* seems quite pessimistic, the book's subtitle, *On Poetry and Finance*, implies his hope for the critical potential of poetry. Here, he stresses the inherent possibilities and potentialities in aesthetics as one solution to the political-clinical condition of crisis. He argues that poetic language is marked by its in-exchangeability and, as a consequence, by the inability to be included in the mechanisms of semio-capitalism: "Poetry", he writes, "is the here and now of the voice, of the body and of the word, sensuously giving birth to meaning."<sup>41</sup> This poetic, sensuous excess is said to break up the automatization of words and bodies and give rise to new meaning. Berardi thus stresses his belief that poetry can subversively reactivate a sensibility in the physical and social bodies—and, ultimately, show a way out of crisis.

Yet, as the Danish literary scholar Elisabeth Friis alludes in the article "Det er gyldne tider - når poesien svarer finanslogikken igen" ["It Is Golden Times—When Poetry Answers the Logic of Finance Back"], it seems quite abstract and unclear how poetry might actualize this potentiality.<sup>42</sup> Where Friis in the article tries to define the idea of a resistance within poetry by analysing poetry

written in this historical conjuncture of crisis and, as she argues, wrestling with it, I allow myself to be more sceptical about this critical potentiality. I find Berardi's statement rather problematic because *if* aesthetics is the science of the derma, and is put into practice through an investigation of the skin—the sensitive, physical or mental surfaces of individual and cultural bodies—why shouldn't *the aesthetic sensibility*, as the bodies mentioned in *The Crisis Notebooks*, also be affected by this crisis? Why shouldn't poetry as well as literature and aesthetics be affected too?

Several times during the 468 pages of the chaotic web of thoughts and emotions *The Crisis Notebooks* appears itself to be in crisis. Especially its enervating, insisting ambiguity seems to cause an inextricable critical condition, which is emblematically expressed in a passage where Pandora falls asleep watching a documentary about LSD:

The feeling of unification, the mysterious experience, which these drugs give, the striking thing is, one of them says that this experience is attained by the disappearance of the body (or the persons in question leave the body), it is in one way grist to my mill that the body is not the way, that the body is not the way to communion (is it even about the community?), the body might come when the way is cleared, on the other hand i don't get it, the spirit is lonely, the body is connected, not to say dependent, so in that way it's the body that's right, i don't understand how one can suddenly see everything through prisms.<sup>43</sup>

In this deeply conflicted stream of consciousness, wherein the body is both the premise for and the impediment to unification/communion/community, an unsettling ambiguity appears. With this 'gaze of prisms' where everything can be perceived from (at least) two perspectives, the text does not exactly appear as marked by a special sensuous excess that can reactivate the sensitive and through new meaning cause movement away from the crisis. Rather it would seem that the text leans over backwards and locks itself into self-contradictions.

This inextricable ambiguity is characteristic of Olsen's other works and particularly the 2012 poetry collection *Third-Millennium Heart*, which in many ways can be said to be a precursor to *The Crisis Notebooks*. In the 2014 article "Kroppen er noget andet: Posthumanisme og cyborghjerner hos Ursula

Andkjær Olsen” [“The Body Is Something Else. Posthumanism and Cyborg Hearts in the Work of Ursula Andkjær Olsen”] the Danish literary scholar Ida Bencke expresses how *Third-Millennium Heart* “is distinguished by such an extensive ambiguity, that ‘the everything’ of the work seems at the edge of imploding into a bewildered nothingness”<sup>44</sup> and that the work “indicates a movement, with which the body as well as the universe slowly but surely expands/breaks down itself.”<sup>45</sup>

As in *Third-Millennium Heart*, which culminates in such an implosion where “ALL AND NO VESSELS ARE CONNECTED,”<sup>46</sup> *The Crisis Notebooks* seems to subvert itself and its directions, exactly by pointing in every direction. This kind of chaotic literature seems to leave its readers in a state of an immense complexity of slippery connections and meanings, which constantly relate/unrelate in new ways. That is to say, rather than projecting bodily or textual sensibility generating new sensuous meaning, as Berardi argues, the text itself appears to undergo a crisis. Through the prisms of contradiction, *The Crisis Notebooks* appears to implode in negations and contrasts, levelling out every meaning. Rather than offering subversive solutions, rather than showing a way out of the crisis, *The Crisis Notebooks* seems to be fully affected by a directionless condition of crisis.

#### THE SENSITIVE TEXT:

##### A MODEST POTENTIALITY OF BODY-LANGUAGE

It is exactly in the middle of the all-embracing condition of crisis, that the ambivalence in the notion of sensibility becomes crucial: if sensibility is conceptualized solely as a positive potentiality, the (crisis-)inhibited aesthetic sensibility wouldn't be a useful or reliable way to represent, reflect or understand a particular historical situation. But within the dysfunctional aspect of sensibility, *The Crisis Notebooks* could, on a formal level, appear overstimulated, hypersensitive; its fragmented, self-contradictory textuality as being directly affected by a contemporary condition of crisis. Turning away from the inhibited, the dysfunctional and the non-existent sensibility on the level of the content, I'll end this article by introducing the rhetorical figure of the *aposiopesis*<sup>47</sup>, which accentuates the material aspect of the text on a formal level. The *aposiopesis* designates a relation between the body, the voice and the text, and is usually referred to as a “stylistic term of breaking in the middle speech, which has nothing to do with implicit understanding, but happens when the living vibrations and resonances of the flesh affect the linguistic ability of the speaker.”<sup>48</sup>

Through the lens of this notion, it becomes possible to analyze the different positions of narration—Pandora in *Pandora Blue Box*, and the anonymous first-person narrator of *The Atlantis Syndrome*—as voices influenced by a body, which again is influenced by the interior condition of crisis in *The Crisis Notebooks*. Furthermore, it allows *The Crisis Notebooks* to be considered an aesthetic utterance in itself, whose sensible voice is affected by a contemporary condition of crisis. Recalling Berardi's argument that aesthetics is the science of the derma and the sensitive surfaces, the textual materiality of aesthetic work seems to respond to the crisis precisely by stuttering, stammering, fantasizing, confused and filled with interruptions, corrections and doubt. However, where the content of *The Crisis Notebooks* is marked by the absence of any recognizable representations of bodily sensibility, which is rather expressed as borders, surfaces, plastic or crystal, the formal structure of the novel—the fragmented, indeterminate, porous surface of the text—seems contrarily to express a sensitive sense of embodiment: a flickering voice or a hesitant body-language, which, despite it being affected by crisis, has not lost its sensible contact with the surrounding world. This is exactly my point, and where I wish to conclude this article: that the formal structure of the novel—unlike the characters—stays with the experience of a dysfunctional sensibility, expresses itself through it and thus, like a sensuous surface, reacts and responds to its surroundings. Rather than entrenching itself in impervious materials, the formal structure of the novel itself appears as if touched by crisis. Through its aposiopetic flickering of this touch *The Crisis Notebooks* makes manifest a bodily vulnerability, insecurity and doubt.

Thus, the text itself resembles a body; a textual, sensuous, material body which seems to be a container—or a box, if you like—for the contemporary experience of crisis. In the small 1986 essay *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* American sci-fi author, essayist and poet Ursula K. Le Guin calls for a poetics that turns away from the dominant, linear, masculine, heroic ways of narrating history, which with the shape of an arrow or a sword “is starting *here* and going straight *there*. THOK. Hitting its mark (which drops dead).”<sup>49</sup> Instead, she suggests a new way of narrating history, telling stories, creating myths, which, as an alternative to focusing on *the thing*, draws attention to *the things that hold other things*, arguing that the most fitting shape for a novel she can think of might be that of a sack or a bag, as books hold words and words hold things or carry meanings:<sup>50</sup>

Conflict, competition, stress, struggle, etc., within the narrative conceived as carrier bag/belly/box/house/medicine bundle, may be seen as necessary elements of a whole which itself cannot be characterized either as conflict or as harmony since its purpose is neither resolution nor stasis but continuing process.<sup>51</sup>

This poetics, according to which the purpose of narration is neither resolution nor stasis but a continuing, speculative process “full of beginnings without ends, of initiations, of losses, of transformations and translations and far more tricks than conflicts, far fewer triumphs than snares and delusions (...),”<sup>52</sup> sheds new light on the alternatives or potentialities presented in *The Crisis Notebooks*. With the explicit reference to the myth of Pandora in the subtitle *Pandora Blue Box*, and with the recurrent play on a textual/physical body as a container of experience of crisis—these ideas are clearly present in the novel. In that sense, *The Crisis Notebooks* could resemble a black box (a small electronic device, placed in an aircraft for the purpose of recording everything which happens before a plane crash), a sensitive recording of an emotional, personal but also collective, contemporary historical crash.

It is in this sensitive surface of contact between the crisis and the novel that a kind of aesthetic sensibility appears. However, it is more modest than the one Berardi called for. Rather than unfolding an excess of sensibility, an abundance of bodily potentiality for interconnectedness, which brings about new meaning and new imaginaries, which, somewhat heroically, can show a way out of the crisis, *The Crisis Notebooks* expresses a kind of fabulating body-language, which in a trembling voice quavers around in the extended condition of crisis. The aesthetic potentiality of *The Crisis Notebooks* emerges exactly, not in spite of, but because the novel is undergoing a crisis; it is by virtue of its quavering sense of embodiment, its vulnerable voice, its dragging out and its bated breath, that it expresses a *sensuous experience of crisis*. Or, to quote Donna Haraway, *The Crisis Notebooks* appears to be staying with sensibility while “staying with the trouble.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, alternatives are not to be found outside of the crisis, or in a movement out of the crisis, but instead it is from this sensitive, fabulating, vulnerable, insurgent ground, or container, that other narratives, other embodiments, other myths and other poetics are made possible.



## CONCLUSION

Through the notion of sensibility, as a bodily basis of experience and as an aesthetic notion, in this article I have examined the relationship of crisis, body and literature, in the context of the contemporary economic and financial predicament.

Following Berardi's political and clinical diagnosis of contemporary Western society as experiencing a permanent crisis condition of suspended change, derived from finance- and semio-capitalism's inhibiting economizing pervasion of human sensibility—I have suggested this crisis is a crisis in sensibility itself. Contrary to Berardi and as a reorientation of the main focus of critical finance studies, I argue that such framing of perspective renders a bodily experience of crisis, or the finance-affected materiality, perceptible. Thus, with the double meaning of the notion of sensibility, I have approached the relation between the contemporary financialized conjuncture and a specific sensitive bodily experience of crisis, through Olsen's novel *The Crisis Notebooks*, which led to a paradoxical representation of the economized social sensibility as both inhibited and overstimulated.

With reference to Fastrup's interpretation of French vitalism's more ambiguous and biological, material idea of sensibility, that is both constructive and destructive, I argue that a more complex understanding of sensibility would be fruitful for the analysis, stressing sensibility at the basis of experience as problematic or critical in itself. The inclusion of an experience of a material-dysfunctional aspect of sensibility in my analysis led me to conclude that three kinds of sensibility—the inhibited, the dysfunctional and the non-existent—constitute three relations between the body and the crisis: a bodily experience of crisis; a body which in itself is the cause of the experience of crisis; and a denial of the body that, as it is no longer experiences, enforces further the permanent state of crisis.

By focusing on Berardi's idea that aesthetics holds a potential for reactivating the constructive sensibility, I have discussed whether *The Crisis Notebooks* as a literary work offers potential solutions or resistant alternatives or if the novel, in itself, is undergoing a crisis. From this I concluded that *The Crisis Notebooks*, at a formal level, carries and communicates a kind of body-language, a textual, overstimulated, quivering sensibility that, more than implying a heroic movement out of the crisis, hints towards a possible bodily sensibility within the crisis, which, I contend, is the vulnerable but insurgent ground from which new narratives, embodiments, and myths are to be found, felt, formulated or fabulated.

- 1 Ursula Andkjær Olsen, *Krisehæfterne: Pandora Blue Box. Atlantissyndromet* (København: Gyldendal, 2017), 454.
- 2 My translation of *Krisehæfterne. Pandora Blue Box. Atlantissyndromet*. All quotes from this novel are translated by me.
- 3 My translation of Ursula Andkjær Olsen, *Udgående Fartøj* (København: Gyldendal, 2015).
- 4 As argued among others by Robert Brenner, "What Is Good for Goldman Sachs Is Good for America: The Origins of the Current Crisis," April 2009, <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/issr/cstch/papers/BrennerCrisisTodayOctober2009.pdf>, and Greta Krippner, "Introduction," and "What is financialization?," in *Capitalizing on Crisis - the political origins of the rise of finance* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012).
- 5 Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2007), xii.
- 6 Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012), 8.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 53.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 9 Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *After the Future*, eds. Gary Genosko and Nicholas Thoburn (Edinburgh: AK Press 2011), 132.
- 10 Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance*, 145.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 30.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 86.
- 13 Christian Marazzi, *The Violence of Financial Capitalism* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011).
- 14 Donald MacKenzie, *Material Markets - How Economic Agents are Constructed*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- 15 Arjun Appadurai, *Banking on Words - The Failure of Language in the Age of Derivative Finance* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).
- 16 Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance*, 86.
- 17 Franco 'Bifo' Berardi. *AND - Phenomenology of the End: Sensibility and Connective Mutation* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2015), 113.
- 18 Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *After the Future*, 132.
- 19 Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance*, 120-121.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 124-125.
- 21 Ursula Andkjær Olsen. *Krisehæfterne: Pandora Blue Box. Atlantissyndromet*, 412.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 105.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 109.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 110.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 109.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 112.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 112.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 460.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 113.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 33.
- 31 My translation of Anne Fastrup, *Sensibilitetens Bevægelse: Denis Diderots fysiologiske æstetik* (København: Museum Tusulanums Forlag, 2007). All quotes from this book are translated by me.
- 32 Anne Fastrup, *Sensibilitetens Bevægelse: Denis Diderots fysiologiske æstetik*, 86.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 65.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 171.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 18.
- 38 Ursula Andkjær Olsen, *Krisehæfterne: Pandora Blue Box. Atlantissyndromet*, 288.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 329.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 395.
- 41 Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance*, 21.
- 42 Friis, Elisabeth, "Det er gyldne tider - når poesien svarer finanslogikken igen." *Kritik, Krise*, no. 214 (2015): 53.
- 43 Ursula Andkjær Olsen. *Krisehæfterne: Pandora Blue Box. Atlantissyndromet*, 364.
- 44 Ida Bencke, "Kroppen er noget andet: Posthumanisme og cyborghjerter hos Ursula Andkjær Olsen," *Kritik, Naturen, det billige skidt*, no. 211 (2015): 54.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 55.
- 46 Ursula Andkjær Olsen *Third-Millennium Heart*, trans. Katrine Øgaard (Berlin: Broken Dimanche Press/Notre Dame, IN: Action Books, 2017), 210.
- 47 The literary historian Anna Kornbluh has also been working with stylistic figures and finance: Anna Kornbluh, *Realizing Capital - Financial and Psychic Economies in Victorian Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).
- 48 My translation of Martin Gregersen and Tobias Skiveren, *Den materielle drejning: Natur, teknologi og krop i (nyere) dansk litteratur* (Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2016), 127.
- 49 Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," in *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* (Newburyport: Grove Atlantic, 1989), 156.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 156.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 156.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 157.
- 53 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).