



By Murray Whyte

Visual arts



Crisis in the Credit System, by Melanie Gilligan

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A still image from Melanie Gilligan's "Crisis in the Credit System," a four-episode story of post-Credit Crisis disaster that takes the form of a self-help group for shamed financial professionals.

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In the opening moments of *Crisis in the Credit System*, a bitingly funny, deliberately flummoxing miniseries of sorts by the young Canadian, London-based artist Melanie Gilligan, a kindly young woman with pulled-back curly hair stands in a peaceful garden, encircled by a group of haggard, slump-shouldered men and women.

The implication, of an idyllic group therapy session, is clear before she opens her mouth. “I’d like everyone to introduce themselves to the group,” she smiles warmly, as each goes about their two-line bios: Ian, financial analyst; Penelope, private fund deal manager; Mark, derivative portfolio analyst.

Then, the story takes a sharp turn: “These are incredibly dangerous financial times for an investment bank like ours,” continues the friendly group leader. “So: think optimal adaptive strategies.” What ensues, endgame role-playing to fashion a profit-maximization strategy for the coming apocalypse

Herein lies the crux of Gilligan’s project: In a moment of cataclysmic global financial upheaval, even disaster can be monetized. This is an obvious bit of hyperbole extracted from the very real circumstance of monetized debt that brought on the 2008 U.S. foreclosure disaster, which in turn tipped the first domino in an international credit crisis (for which Gilligan’s project is named).

It would be easy on first glance, then, to shrug off *Crisis in the Credit System* as a pedantic, moralizing lampoon of heartless advantage-taking on the part of the financial services industry (which is likely also true, and maybe not even hyperbole). But not so fast. The four episodes of *Crisis in the Credit System* are a deftly-maneuvered, incisive and absurdly hilarious view of a very-near future not far off Gilligan’s imagining (“Food prices tripling in five months,” muses an executive at Babel Capital Co. to his boss. “Shortages, poverty, hunger,” she responds, searching for opportunity, stroking her chin. Then, she snaps-to: “Weight loss!” she cries, and a new investment strategy is born.)

Which leads to the question, I suppose, of what qualifies *Crisis* strictly as art, not film or television. Gilligan self-consciously plies the conventions of television, complete with a flashy credit sequence, logo, theme song and teaser — “Has Babel really found a way to profit from collective

anxiety?” Stay tuned! — and presents the entire series online, in a democratic, YouTube-esque gesture (*Crisis*, along with a more recent piece/series, *Popular Unrest*, are installed at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at the University of Toronto, if you’d rather watch them in public instead of your pajamas).

Just the simple fact that she’s committed to telling a story, complete with character, narrative arc, and conclusion, pushes against the conventions of video art, which has, as a general rule rejected convention in favour of oblique formal experimentation. But this is a line becoming more blurred all the time. Gilligan and Ryan Trecartin, who one could fairly argue has fast become the best-known artist in video of his very young generation, have precisely nothing in common but for their medium, and their choice of distribution (Trecartin famously posted all his hectic, absorbingly repugnant “movies” — his word — online before they became art-world sensations). But the enthusiasm this new generation of artists seems to have to embrace previously verboten conventions like story, character and episode suggest to me a desire to break out of the generally tiny box in which video art tends to be trapped.

You could call it something of a Trojan horse, I suppose, rendering idea and aesthetic in a language instantly recognizable by virtually the entire population. And while *Crisis* is hardly *CSI*, it’s not too far a leap to make a direct comparison to such enthrallingly intense projects like Lars Von Trier’s creepy supernatural hospital drama *The Kingdom*. I wouldn’t put *Crisis* up against *Survivor* in primetime, but as a late-night PBS series, why not? I bet it gets better ratings than *Masterpiece Theatre*.

Gilligan is highly skilled at crafting buyable characters to carry heady concepts, and her second work at the Barnicke Gallery, *Popular Unrest*, delves into more visceral territory. Once again in the very near future, a central social network designed, in the words of its chief architect, “to integrate life in as many ways as possible,” namely in maximizing profitability and erasing boundaries between work and life, and the always-on implication of this purpose has chilling resonance with the absorbing virtual worlds of Facebook and Twitter that more and more of us seem lost inside every day.

In *Popular Unrest*, Gilligan’s dystopic technological overlord is called “The Spirit,” and the Orwellian overtones, of a central monitoring agency keeping track of all interactions on earth every moment of every day, are abundantly clear. A weary call-centre employee at the Spirit’s corporate headquarters warns an agitated, unemployed customer that “negative behaviour will affect your social energy rating,” and the implications of this have suddenly become more dire: The Spirit — a small group of people drawn together by a glitch in the system discover — is killing people seemingly at random, and they can’t find out why.

The group is a construct that allows Gilligan to explore the ideas of the willing loss of a sense of self in a technologically-cooked social stew, and the subsequent desire to belong, in a physical way, in a world that is suddenly incomprehensibly large and accessible. Here, much more than in *Crisis*, we find the work's emotional core: A group of people, needing not social energy ratings or hyper-connectivity, but starving for the actual human interaction they find with each other. These interactions are brilliantly acted and often quite moving, counterbalancing Gilligan's intentionally-stylized camp melodrama with genuine emotion and character that is disarmingly intense and fully-felt.

Hyperbolized fantasy drawn from quietly disturbing reality — I'm relieved to see I'm not the only one who finds Facebook's constant cataloguing of millions of people's far-too-personal details overwhelmingly creepy — is Gilligan's m.o., and this kind of dark extrapolation has fueled entire genres of dystopic sci-fi fantasy (see most of Greg Bear's work, to say nothing of Robert Heinlein, Philip K. Dick, and even our very own Margaret Atwood with *The Handmaid's Tale*). *Popular Unrest* is heady, at times too heady, confusing, perhaps intentionally, with pseudo-philosophical bafflegab. But in the moments where the group step outside the system, it is weirdly, arrestingly heartfelt, which is more than you can say for most dramas, prime-time or otherwise.

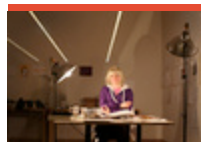
Melanie Gilligan, Crisis in the Credit System and Popular Unrest are at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Hart House, University of Toronto, until April 8. Both series can be viewed in their entirety at their respective websites, and popularunrest.org.

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