

Ten years of NECSUS: A birthday card

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Happy birthday, NECSUS! You are a big kid now. You saw so many things happening and you offered your e-pages to many extraordinary authors to report, think through, analyse those things! Ten years is a long time. Even longer when they entail both a hyper-acceleration in the use of media infrastructure, of technological sophistication, and the rare opportunity to stop and look at these processes from the vantage point of a temporary suspension allowing for a critical reflection in hindsight, and perhaps still holding room for a further profound call to reflect to come. This birthday card to you, which tries to interpret in an affectionate way the very hard brief to compose a short statement answering no less than questions such as ‘what is the future I envision for media studies’, may be the right occasion to articulate a few ideas which one day may feed into that call.

Without falling in the easy pitfall of writing yet another critical report on the impact of Covid-19, there is no doubt about the remarkable opportunity the global pandemic is giving to realise how we, as media scholars, do not deal with objects and practices that pertain to representation or fiction alone, but more than ever do engage with our daily experience. What is discussed in your glorious 19 open access issues needs then to be acknowledged as something that is by no means – with a now retro-aesthetics touch – a ‘second life’ unfolding within our devices, but rather the first wherein we dwell. Media, to which you are devoted, are in other words radically imbued in reality, they do not simply double it up, offering a way out of reality, they just feed into it. In so doing, they truly impact on people’s lives, influence their sense of identity, belonging, memory, inclusion, exclusion, their cultural, public and private personae, their social and intimate relationships.

Often we are asked what is the impact of our research, how it is measurable: perhaps it is not really measurable, because it is intertwined with life.

How can life be measured? Many of us grew academically by studying acclaimed theories, among which the fortunate formulation according to which media are extensions of men. Perhaps they are now somewhat indistinguishable from them, and your pages are a site where this can be discussed, experimented, questioned, maybe denied. This consideration is admittedly very broad and opens way too many reflections; I will choose just two avenues that I feel are worth embarking on to celebrate your birthday. These two are the questions that ten years ago when you were born were already underway but they are now pressing, crucial, and unavoidable.

First, saying that media seamlessly enter our life means that they become the texture of our experience. They are woven into it as the thread in the fabric. The result is a postdigital scenario, and your themed special issues are a clear symptom of this, insofar as they demonstrate how reflecting on a wide range of topics such as waste, crisis, gesture, solidarity, or war, to mention but a few, cannot overlook the presence and the role of media. If on the one hand this sketches a situation which, possibly more than ever, puts us, media users and critics, in a foreground position, on the other hand the narrative of democratisation and empowerment is yet to become a reality on a global scale, with huge disparities between Westernised Northern areas of the world and the global South.

With important effects on how power, control, social, cultural, and political discourses take shape, the naturalised permeability of media structures our environment. Consequently, while we seem to be destined to a seeming dematerialisation of our practices happening seamlessly across the on- and off-screen spheres (i.e. NFTs, virtual exhibitions and blockchain-related artistic formats, but also online film festivals or photo fairs), a deeper awareness of the same practices open up room for a critical consideration of the material side of dematerialisation, making it urgent to engage with the infrastructural and extraction logics it entails. In this context, it is interesting to notice the tactical revamping of previous media practices such as analogue film labs in the light of a slightly avant-gardist spirit of fracture with institutional modes of cultural production and art making, as well as acknowledging how tactical glitches become radical practices of resistance.

I wish you a future of unforgettable pages that will address such problems, grasping their urgency, shedding light on our mutual implications with the media, and offering important insights around the inequalities we face with, through, and because of our media system. In a way, you are an online journal and you are indeed an example of these implications I refer to: may you

be a means to unravel the complex logics of our postdigital world, and may the content you circulate help reduce inequalities!

At the same time, all of the above cannot but underline the incredibly dynamic nature of the environment we live in. My second observation to you, then, dear NECSUS, is that in such an environment where the threshold canonically separating us from media is blurred, one of the most significant characteristics is a broad sense of fluidity investing all levels of the context – actual and conceptual – that we are moving across. Fluidity mobilises forms and formats, contaminates languages and codes, subverts epistemologies and traditional disciplinary realms. Attempts to process and come to terms with such epochal changes include contesting institutionalised narratives of linear time and inhabitable space in favour of a multi-dimensional, non-linear conception of history and spatiality. Over the last ten years this led to the peak of a crisis of our objects of study and the disciplines we adopt to understand them, which in fact dates a while back. These, of course, do not cease to exist but in many cases faced a narrative of exhaustion, end, elegy, and – at times not without a touch of drama – death, paving the way for post-theory and a set of post-disciplines (the ‘post’ in question indicating most of the times a temporal succession rather than a critical questioning, as in postdigital which I have employed above), establishing new perimeters for scientific inquiries, new interdisciplinary exchanges and thus new research methods.

Browsing across your issues, NECSUS, this becomes apparent by noticing how your sections increased in number, comprise different research approaches that are not constrained to previous standards of scientific rigour, and conversely contribute to affirm new ones: next to classic features or monographic articles, for example, you have video essays which represent a clear bridge between theory and practice-based research. The same fluidity in formats and methods not only assesses the necessity to see theory and practice comparatively, as sides of the same coin concurring to a unique process of knowledge creation, but serves as a due exhortation directed on the end of theory to remain close to the phenomena it tries to explain, and on that of artists to look for creative inspiration in categories of thought that may be perceived as abstract, distant, or foreign. Embracing the potential fruitful exchanges between theory and practice is telling of the methodological challenges that the contemporary scenario poses. Also, it describes a situation whereby media specificity is not in question, but hybrid forms are not either.

A context of fluidity is one of becoming and rapidly morphing media configurations, one where ongoingness is worthy of attention as much as traditional canons are.

Dear NECSUS, how much there is to discuss in celebrating your ten years! Looking at you, in fact, as the incredible media artefact you are, would be a tremendously interesting exercise to try to sum up the past decade. Let's invent a new ritual and repeat this very exercise in ten more years' time. It is exciting to think what imaginary media we can envisage today and what the actual 2031 media imagery will entail!

To these wonderful years, and to many more! From an affectionate section editor, reader, and author.

Author

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