

Editorial NECSUS

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Today the tower's flock, the usual birds, flew in a kind of scatter pattern, their paths intricately chaotic, the bunch parting and interweaving like boiling pasta under a pot's lifted lid. It appeared someone had given the birds new instructions, had whispered that there was something to avoid, or someone to fool. I once heard Perkus Tooth say that he'd woken that morning having dreamed an enigmatic sentence: "Paranoia is a flower in the brain." [...] Yet I hadn't understood what the words meant to him until now, when I knew for a crucial instant that the birds had been directed to deceive me. That was when I saw the brain's flower. Perkus had, I think, been trying to prepare me for how beautiful it was. – Jonathan Lethem

In a recent novel, *Chronic City* (2009), weird characters and stories pile up: a former child actor, a sculptor working on disaster sites, a ghost-writer faking her identity by producing autobiographies, and the co-protagonist of the plot, Perkus Tooth, who once was a film critic and now works as a compiler of DVD booklets for the Criterion Collection. Most of the characters embody former promises led astray by time and involution, as much as the chronic city, New York, that gives the novel its title, a place where mysterious events happen, but do not truly affect the life of the city itself. The author of the novel, Jonathan Lethem, is known for shaping his works through the lens of dystopian narratives and popular culture, including cinema. Indeed, Perkus Tooth is a telling character: on the one hand, he embodies the voracious cinephile working at the canonisation of film heritage for the connoisseurs' market; on the other hand, Tooth's knowledgeability, rather than setting boundaries and producing definitions, gives rise to paranoid but compelling theories about the world, which the protagonist, Chase Insteadman, patiently listens to. If we take this fascinating novel that deals with the fate of popular culture as a blueprint for our discipline, we might want to ask if the future of media studies is leading us towards a self-referential, multi-glossal discourse, or if we can expect something more promising and prospectively useful in understanding media and the(ir) world?

To celebrate the first decade of NECSUS – a journal originating in the heterogenous and vibrant community of media scholars organised within NECS – we asked friends, colleagues, accomplices, and fellow travellers to address some basic questions about the present and future of media studies, from their respective backgrounds and scopes of interests. Having started ten years ago with an issue titled #Crisis, we considered that surviving throughout a decade, expanding our format, consistently increasing our readership and widening the network of our contributors might give us a chance to look at what awaits us, beyond past and present crisis – but with a critical lens.

The various contributions provide us and our readers with an impressively dense and varied set of questions and answers, which we would like to collect under umbrella-terms. First: *disaggregation and reconfiguration*. Notoriously, Roland Barthes liked to leave the cinema, and discussed it in terms of a (dark) hall, a lure, and an image: ‘The image is there, in front of me, for me: coalescent [...], analogical, total, pregnant; it is a perfect lure.’ Now, media images seem as scattered in terms of production, location, and consumption as the flocks of birds Chase admires. Media studies now look at objects such as images, films, and broadcasting in new configurations, chase them along numerous tracks, across media platforms, archives, repositories, modes of consumption. Facing this essential openness and elusiveness is crucial and challenging – may you call it post-cinema, intermediality, or post-migrant media, where the stress is always on the prefix, enhancing a condition beyond the certainty of time (post-) or space (inter-) for media and identities. Transition is the common condition. Possibly, language is not anymore the most effective tool in tracking said transition, and images attempt to explain other images, as when John Berger, in a discussion of photography, states that it is a way perception becomes self-aware. Looking at images through images is not only a refreshing engagement for media scholars, but more radically a different way of thinking (with) the images and letting the images think. Second: *praxis and operativity*. Media studies increasingly focuses on images either generated or analysed (or both things) mechanically, or as part and parcel of production, surveillance, distribution, and working procedures. Mooring media speculation in an anthropocentric perspective is doubtlessly inherent to Humanities. However, the discipline has engaged with major shifts by decentering the human, and relocating it within a new attention to praxis, whether through new modes of doing criticism embedded in the processed images of the video essay, the importance of algorithms in critical discourse or the attention given to the proliferating operative images and imaginaries..

Third: *labour and collaboration*. Despite the fact that images are automatically generated, scrutinised, or processed, human labour is still required, in terms of media (or academic) work. Looking at media beyond the image (or at the image as congealed labour) provides media scholars with many a chance: exploring modes of production and related cultures sheds a light on how media products come into being, circulate, incorporate values; but also paves the way for strategic allegiance and cooperation between academic and media practitioners. Academic labour, both teaching and research, requires self-awareness, in order to not lag behind media processes, but also for avoiding becoming the mouthpiece of institutional agencies and media concerns. But placing the notion of labour – and, next to it, collaboration – as the cornerstone of such awareness can help prevent such risks, challenging inherited habits of academic behaviour, including the tendency to atomisation in the neoliberal university. Finally: *ethics and politics*. That is – the complex task of assessing right and wrong conduct as related to the public good. Media mirror, produce, and affect environments. They depict, but also actualise geopolitical divides, in terms of resources, infrastructures, policies, and access. Media are both an opportunity for elaborating ethics and responding to inequalities, misconducts, and shortcomings in ways that are nothing short of political. We thank all the contributors for sharing their inspiring thoughts and planting the seeds for new ideas to blossom.

The early steps towards the first issue of NECSUS were taken in 2010. Meetings quickly multiplied and got longer, either at the annual conferences (in Istanbul 2010 and London 2011), in Amsterdam, where many members of the original board, as well as AUP, are based, or online through Skype, when videoconferencing was not yet an everyday experience – before the pandemic and Zoom made this our daily bread. The journal was presented to the NECS membership and general readership on the occasion of the NECS conference in Lisbon (2012). It was meant from its very first day as an open, inclusive, critical platform, bringing together scholars working on and with different media, subjects, methods, and academic backgrounds. Despite the obstacles open access initiatives encountered in the long-term, NECSUS kept on growing and thriving in terms of outreach, quality, and prestige. As for NECS as an association, NECSUS has been an incredible adventure, offering a chance to share the concerns and the hopes of this burgeoning field of studies among the members of the Editorial Board, of NECS, and media scholars overall. Among the last three standing members of the original Editorial Board (Greg de Cuir Jr, Malte Hagener, and Francesco Pitassio), Malte and

Francesco will step down, while the relentless, lucid, incredibly committed Greg, who acted as editorial manager from the start, will keep on nurturing every single issue with care. Malte and Francesco never regretted a single minute of time spent on this unique endeavour – if the notion of ‘bottom up’ has some meaning, NECSUS perfectly incarnates it for them. Therefore, from the next issue onwards the Editorial Board will have gone through its first cycle of entire renewal which, we all believe, is a wonderful promise for the future and, like Chase, gives us a chance to keep on picking the brain’s flowers...