

NECSUS Editorial Board

Editorial NECSUS #1, Spring 2012, 'Crisis'

2012

<https://doi.org/10.5117/NECSUS2012.1.EDIT>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

NECSUS Editorial Board: Editorial NECSUS #1, Spring 2012, 'Crisis'. In: *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies*, Jg. 1 (2012), Nr. 1, S. 1–3. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5117/NECSUS2012.1.EDIT>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://doi.org/10.5117/NECSUS2012.1.EDIT>

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Editorial Necsus, #1, Spring 2012, 'Crisis'



Now is the time of/for crisis – whether we think about the global financial system, the environment, the European Union, democracy, publishing, even the arts. As we live our mediated and connected lives the symptoms appear to be everywhere. These crises are inextricably and fundamentally linked to the media because without the media we would hardly know anything about them – and the media needs them in order to continue churning out the alerts and special events that have become second nature to its routines. In fact, one could argue that the media assert themselves in our lives by creating and conveying a constant sense of crisis. Mass media seem to be in a perpetual state of turmoil: the film industry, internet start-ups of yesteryear, European public broadcasters, and the traditional print-based media are always on the brink of destruction, if they have not already foundered.

There is a specific temporality that links crisis and media in the way presence is foregrounded and functionalised. In both cases the present moment opens itself up radically towards an uncertain future, intensifying and accelerating it in the process. In this sense, situations of crisis raise issues of agency, determinism and freedom, choice and preferences – because if things are at risk we need to reconsider traditions and certainties, we will want to project models into the future in order to control the situation at hand. Many recent developments in the field of media studies (such as simulations and forecasts, systems theory and complexity studies) are ways of dealing with this specific immediacy of media. If we follow Mary Ann Doane, crisis is (besides information and catastrophe) one of the key temporalities of media in its insatiable hunger for events. Crisis is the time of concentration and compression that creates its own duration.

As historian Reinhart Koselleck has pointed out, the term 'crisis' stems from the Greek *krino* and refers to a whole spectrum of activities such as to cut, to select, to decide, to judge, and by extension to measure, to quarrel, to fight. Crises are ways of mobilising resources which can be used to implement (political, economic, social, cultural) transformations, but also used as a weapon against the powers that be. The recent trend of studying media transformations in the past and present is meant to understand the radical nature of such situations. Current notions such as 'the redistribution of the sensible' (Jacques Rancière), 'the risk society' (Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens), 'governmentality' (Michel Foucault), and

‘the state of emergency’ (Giorgio Agamben) could all be said to address different aspects of crises.

Publishing the first issue of NECSUS with a special section on the topic of crisis is far from coincidental. The proliferation of crises can be taken as a sign of the constant need within neoliberal governmentality to reform and restructure; it can also be taken as a call to use these situations of emergency as productive crises to rethink traditions and routines, to challenge established hierarchies and power relations. Talking about crisis can also signal how the humanities in general are under constant pressure. The field we operate within has suffered considerably in the current climate of austerity, so that addressing the topic of crisis is also a way of talking about our own position within academia and society, as well as delineating the contribution that media studies can make towards understanding the present situation.

For the editors of a new journal, ‘crisis’ is a paradoxical keyword: usually conceived as a closing, a crisis can also possibly lead to a desired turn and improvement. Crisis implies a posthumous condition – it happens as the evolution of a preceding and mythical harmonious state. From this standpoint, crisis is rather a productive centre. We would like to stress here three key issues entailed in the notion of crisis: an analytical attitude, deployed as a tool for critical thinking; a self-reflexivity, questioning the methods and assumptions founding them; a consequent and consistent dismantling of dogmas and commonsensical notions. Critical thinking is often understood as a way to practice (and at the same time nurture) democratic participation, opening up debate and revising shared opinions. We are convinced that such an attitude responds both to a widespread crisis condition, demanding sharp and vivid thinking to reflect upon media processes (rather than deep-rooted knowledge and certainties), and also reflects the very nature of a society such as NECS, which is the driving force behind this journal.

Crisis has deeply affected ways of thinking about images and related discourses. It does not only concern the sunset of classical film and media theories based on ontology (as opposed to contemporary field theories), but also tends to dissolve the notion of a ‘field’ itself. Many questions need to be raised, many territories to be explored and mapped. We should assume theoretical crisis as a drive – not to speculate and reflect in terms of essences and transcendental methods, but rather of contingencies: ‘There is no good reason but contingent reason; there is no universal history except of contingency.’ (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari).

Opening up space for multiple contributions stemming from different methods and coming from a diverse range of scholars and traditions responds to the participatory and bottom-up approaches that have shaped NECS and its vivid debates in the past seven years. We would like to continue fostering these debates, bridging different academic, national, and disciplinary territories. As Robert Sinnerbrink reminds the reader in this volume (and quoting John F. Kennedy), ‘When written in

Chinese, the word “crisis” is composed of two characters. One represents danger and the other represents opportunity.’

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