

Editorial

It might seem a contradiction, or at least an ominous signal, to inaugurate a journal under the sign of 'crisis'. And yet, no concept appears more timely and fitting to initiate an editorial project that aims at studying, interrogating and interpreting culture. If cultural studies are said to be in crisis, or even that cultural studies were already born as crisis, it is no less true that they are always "searching for new ways of understanding the multiplicities of cultural forms and practices, looking back at legacies, moving them forward into the present" (Black et al., 2013: 427). This apparent ambivalence between constant death certificates and reinvented persistence provides a thought-provoking framework to reflect upon the 'cultural discourse of crisis', i.e. the productivity of the concept of 'crisis' in cultural discourses. It is almost ironic that a concept used to diagnose a moment of critical failure has become so prosperous. Indeed, 'crisis' is the one thriving concept that seems immune to crisis. Why is it so rhetorically present, historically dynamic and culturally transversal?

The discursive proliferation of crisis throughout cultural spheres proves that the study of culture, in its plurality of approaches, is urgent and necessary. Because 'crisicism' is both trans-historical and historically situated, transcultural but culturally contingent, this journal wishes to respond to this discursive persistence with an interdisciplinary outlook, self-reflexive epistemology, theoretically informed debate, contextual awareness and close analysis. Tony Bennett has recently argued, in an article entitled "The multiplication of cultural studies' utility" (2013), that cultural studies matter as "a meeting place for heterogeneous forms of socio-cultural and cultural-economy analysis that have diverse forms of practical engagement, with

different degrees of commensurability with one another, which are unlikely to add up to a single political form of mattering, and which are always tied up in variable and mobile interdisciplinary entanglements” (Bennett, 2013: 439). This journal wishes precisely to become a meeting place where diverse and even incommensurable traditions and approaches to the study of culture convene to reflect, discuss and try to make sense of past, current and future cultural challenges. The title of the journal, *Diffractions*, expresses the multiplicity of approaches that the encounter with a cultural object both demands and generates, because, as Lawrence Grossberg argues, cultural practices are “the site of the intersection of many possible effects” (Grossberg, 2010: 28). *Diffractions* does not aim at defusing the tension between often conflicting intellectual practices but rather to spark passionate and informed debate. This is, after all, the ultimate value of cultural studies: the plurality and sharp dissimilarity of resources on which we can draw to probe the complexity and specificity of cultural phenomena.

Because culture is conflict and exchange, each issue of *Diffractions* will be issue-driven, i.e. dedicated to a problem or a concept (even if a tentative concept as the present one) in order to address and illuminate cultural questions through plural yet complementary viewpoints. As Mieke Bal once suggested, concepts are “the sites of debate, awareness of difference, and tentative exchange” (Bal, 2003: 34). As a graduate journal, *Diffractions* encourages the provisional and the exploratory without neglecting intellectual rigour. It supports creative but cogent scholarship, welcoming critique, as Meaghan Morris has put it, “in an inspiring as well as a realistic way” (Morris, 2013: 451). Because the study of culture, and the study of contemporary problems in particular, is impossible without a sense of history, *Diffractions* promotes both historically-aware investigation and openness to new theoretical developments and research areas, from digital media to creative economy.

Because this project wishes to be both international and interdisciplinary, we have constituted an Advisory Board from several continents, research traditions and disciplinary specialties, from cultural theorists to literary, visual culture and performance scholars. Pursuing an international exchange of ideas, the journal welcomes contributions in Portuguese, English and Spanish, thus encouraging a global transfer of knowledge between different national and research cultures. In order to guarantee a credible venue for new researchers, the journal is committed to a selection method based on a double-blind peer-review process. And finally, because this journal believes in and promotes the universal access to knowledge and quality research, it is exclusively online, open access and free. We believe that this solution will not only foster a wider exchange of ideas but also bring more visibility to the work of young researchers.

Because the study of culture is necessarily and “radically contextual” (Grossberg, 2010: 3), this first issue was deliberately envisioned under the sign of crisis. Indeed, at the end of 2013, “crisis” has become a widespread buzzword. As moments of disruption, crises challenge and subvert the existing order of things, creating uncertainty and altering daily life. Occurring both at a personal or socio-political level, as in the case of catastrophes, financial meltdown, environmental disasters, institutional turmoil or political instability, crises are turning points that call our foundations into question and suggest the need for change. On the other hand, as fractures in time, crises can trigger a renewed understanding of the past and cast a new light on the needs and demands of the present. Reinhart Koselleck went so far as defining crisis as the “signature of the modern era”, acknowledging its diagnostic and predicative meaning which underlies modern society’s self-consciousness and critical awareness.

Yet, if crises may be seen as system disturbances, as interruptions of the normal order, as critical moments that promote self-reflection and generate change, they seem nevertheless to have become the new order of things, a condition that morphed into norm. This noun has grown from the grammatical nominative to become a symbolic adjective, signifying a permanent state (of crisis). As Agamben argued about the new governmental state of exception, the recurrence of crises over the last century and particularly over the last few years (in response to various circumstances ranging from 9/11 to global economic recession) has turned the exception into norm, into what he designates “the dominant paradigm” of global politics (Agamben, 2005: 2). And as Slavoj Žižek has also pointed out, crisis ceases to be regarded as an intermission and becomes naturalised into a “way of life” (Žižek, 2010). Indeed, at a time of generalised disorder and insecurity, crisis seems to have become the dominant discursive paradigm, threatening to turn into the master narrative of the 21st century.

This issue wishes to engage in a critical assessment of the rhetoric of generalised crisis – or “crisicism” – and discuss its impact and effects in the field of culture. Crises are interwoven into both ethical and aesthetical reality, are given sustenance and channelled socially and culturally. At the same time as the disruptive character of crisis defies previous models of understanding, every new crisis is anchored in cultural imagination and in a shared reservoir of behavioural and representational patterns from which, in turn, societies will draw to face and process them. This issue aims precisely at gauging the effects of crisis upon the cultural structure and the way representations not only articulate and sublimate collective yet specific meanings of crisis, but also shape our understanding of crises and the way societies negotiate, come to terms and remember them.

In the first article of this issue, "Crisis of Representation, Representation of Crisis: Historical Consciousness in Contemporary Latin American Art and Literature", Daniel Thomaz examines the crisis of representation that struck historical discourse in the last decades of the 20th century. After discussing the main theoretical developments on the representation of history during this period, the author focuses on how historical themes, especially those related to the dictatorial period and its traumatic memories, have been articulated in literary and visual artworks in Latin America. Thomaz argues that a new, postmodern form of historical consciousness, which regards history as a constructed narrative both in style and content, has allowed writers and artists to critically address and engage with historical events, challenging normative representations of the historical past and proposing alternative narratives to the writing of history.

In "Hush, Little Baby-Ghost: The Postcolonial Gothic and Haunting History in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*", Ruth van den Akker examines the postcolonial and the gothic as forms of subversion and transgression. Their articulation allows the narrator to "speak the unspeakable" and enables a renewed comprehension of the past that eventually produces a change in the present. The article offers a reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as a work that stresses the importance of facing an unresolved and repressed traumatic past and thus of exorcising old ghosts. The notion of resistance has a pivotal role in van den Akker's analysis: not only is the infanticide committed by Sethe interpreted as an act of resistance to slavery, but her child's return and her haunting are also perceived as resistance to remembering and reliving a traumatic situation. *Beloved* is therefore understood here as more than a traditional familiar ghost story; it emphasises cultural haunting and the shared trauma of slavery.

Matthew Bessette, in "A General Revolt in the Name of the Soul", offers a detailed description of the emergence of the first psychotherapeutic

movements in the United States at the end of the 19th century/beginning of the 20th, engaging in a rich debate with the social, economic, religious and scientific context of these movements and the era they take place in, marked by profound transformations and significant large-scale social changes. Bessette's analysis seeks not only to denounce the overtly optimistic healing narrative that was engendered by the possibilities of crisis resolution generated by the new discourse on nervous and mental illnesses, but, most importantly, his contention is that this narrative also worked towards reinforcing specific individualisation techniques and totalising procedures which sought to assign designated roles that people were supposed to assume within the (then) newly structured industrialised and market-dominated society and the modes of production (and consumption) which came to define capitalist societies. It is, therefore, not surprising that he comes to conclude that this optimistic healing narrative for self and society envisioned by mind healers more than a century ago has found fertile terrain in contemporary neoliberal economic regimes and their complex scenarios of crisis.

In "The Dialectics of Crisis: The Romanticised Apocalypse in J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* and Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*" Siobhan Lyons probes an optimistic interpretation of the apocalypse in opposition to more negative and normative representations of the end of the world. Lyons contends that Ballard's novel and von Trier's movie, albeit their situational differences, challenge this representational normativity, providing an heterodox and nuanced response to the crises of their times in portraying the apocalypse as that which cannot be controlled, preparing readers and spectators to deal with the (un)expected.

Finally, in "Exorcising the Ghost - or Spectres of Bin Laden", Torsten Andreasen looks at Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* to interrogate the implications opened up by this specific narrative approach to a traumatic

moment of crisis, the horrors it implies and the possibilities of closure it might entail. It is Andreasen's contention that the cycle upon which this narrative is being unfolded, which revolves around crisis, in a first instance of death and trauma; coercion, as search for treatment; and finally closure, which is once again found in death, can never be as comfortably completed without questioning the discursive device of spectrality which is employed as a narrative strategy resounding throughout the entire duration of the film, just as the lingering effects of the initial traumatic event cannot be easily overcome. Whether searching for prevention or redemption, while attempting to restore order after catastrophe has struck, Andreasen seems to suggest that the disadjustment which comes along with crisis should not always be forced onto a resolution which tentatively redeems that past by engaging in a game of ghosts, but might indeed be allowed to carry the possibility of a future.

In the interview published in this issue, Andreas Huyssen affirms that "the present is notorious for not being graspable". Because this makes the historically informed study of the present the more necessary, we hope this issue, in its plurality of approaches to the cultural discourse of crisis, enables a critical assessment of the rhetoric of our times. Far from proposing a unified or comprehensive answer to the problem of 'Crisicism', this issue, and the next to come, proves that culture can only be approached in its plural, shifting and kaleidoscopic existence.