

CRISIS/MEDIA

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INTRODUCTION

“The darkest, hottest place in hell waits for that repulsive angel choir
Which, at the hour when crisis strikes, sings equivocal, neutral songs”.
Dante, *Inferno*, *Canto III*.

From the very beginning of this century, we have hurtled on as if from crisis to crisis. The images of entire cities being bombed into submission from the air, of planes crashing into skyscrapers, of neighbourhoods aflame, of occupying armies and fleeing civilians, of suicide bombers, ethnic cleansing, and riot police assaulting unarmed demonstrators have branded themselves onto our consciousness with mounting frequency. These are the substance of the meditations of all our mornings, as we pick up the day's newspaper, switch on the radio in the kitchen, or the television in the living room, or log on to the internet. These are times for sober reflection, and that, precisely, is what we often find missing, as newscasters, editors and experts – contemporary versions of Dante's “repulsive angel choir” – sing their ‘equivocal, neutral songs’, every day, every night.

Such times demand an urgent renewal, rather than the abdication, of critical sensibilities in media practice. Ranjit Hoskote, in the essay that opens the arguments of this collection, reminds us that the two words – ‘crisis’ and ‘critique’ – “derive from the same Greek root: *krinein*, to decide. But where ‘crisis’ denotes the forcing of an individual decision by structural compulsions, ‘critique’ connotes an autonomy of decision, a power of reflexive agency on the part of an individual”.

A commitment to critique is based on the assumption that, when it comes to the things that are most important to us, dissent, difference and disagreement are of far greater value than bland consensus. But passionate commitments need not detract from sobriety. Muzamil Jaleel writes, in concluding his reflection on being a reporter in Kashmir, “We have to have a sense of the boiling point and keep our writing always a few degrees below that threshold ... Flow like a river and follow events as they happen”.

Jaleel is not arguing for reticence, but for an act of bearing witness that remains partisan to what it sees, while ensuring that its narratological credibility can survive to bear the burden of the story that it seeks to tell. This is the difference between ‘safe’ and ‘engaged, but responsible’ practice. The crucial difference between self-censorship and self-reflexivity.

This accumulation of situations of crisis and their rapid, almost real-time, dissemination in the media, has no doubt precipitated new opportunities for communicative action and

global reflection, just as they have signalled an onset of a severe crisis within the media – a crisis of over-stimulation and under-statement, of exaggeration and exhaustion, of censorship and spin-doctoring, of fear and favour. The overproduction of crises perhaps leads to a deeper malaise, a persistent and growing lack of attention to what we, in this book, call the ‘Deep Instabilities’ of our times.

Arundhati Roy, while talking of the need to be cautious about the media’s notion of crisis, the media’s obsession with war, television-friendly images of disaster and conflict, and a ‘critical mass’ of the dead and the dying, says, “For most people in the world, peace is war – a daily battle against hunger, thirst and the violation of their dignity. Wars are often the end result of a flawed peace, a putative peace. And it is the flaws, the systemic flaws in what is normally considered to be ‘peace’, that we ought to be writing about. We have to, at least some of us have to, become peace correspondents instead of war correspondents. We have to lose our terror of the mundane”. In variation, we could add: crisis is a state of normality, with stability and prosperity the exception.

Having lost our terror of the mundane, is it possible for us to begin to debate and problematize the whole notion of ‘representation’ itself? The routines of the ‘expert’, the ‘victim’, the ‘star campaigner’, the ‘primary witness’ and even the ‘special correspondent’ are often deemed necessary to give reality the burnish of crisis in order to make it newsworthy. Can we wrest the desire for attention to reality back from the grip of the need for constant crisis?

This is true not only in situations where, peace, clearly is war, but also in situations that are perhaps best described as ‘lapsed crises’. Lapsed in the sense that they have gone under the radar, and hence, for all intents and purposes, do not exist. This is what Meena Nanji has to say about Afghanistan today. “Afghanistan doesn’t really make the headlines anymore, unless one of the hundreds of international aid workers or American troops is attacked, or more than thirty Taliban are killed ... We hear nothing of the struggles of everyday life, the small, mundane things that are made almost insurmountable by the destruction wrought during the last twenty five years of war. We hear little about how people manage without running water, without electricity, little of the ‘reconstruction effort’ its successes and failures. We hear little of the Afghan women who were so recently asked to galvanize the US call to war”.

These are open questions, with no satisfactory and coherent answers, but *Sarai Reader 04* would like to take them on, so as to map new territories of thought about media practice. Running through this book is a concern to develop agile, responsive ways of doing media that are not captive to ‘events and issues’ but that actually expand communicative potential in society. Ricardo Rosas, in his essay on Tactical Media in Brazil, spells out an exemplary vision of what these practices might be. While discussing the Autolabs project in São Paulo, he says that tactical media means “...opening up new spaces for cultural, artistic and media interaction, creating forms of access to knowledge resources for individuals or groups excluded from the new paradigm raised by the technological revolution ... developing visual, sonic and textual sensitivities, and making social actions of collective utility possible”.

We see this book as hoping to embody what Rosas would consider to be an ensem-

ble of tactical media practices. Both the text and the design of the book are thought of in terms of a series of arguments with the visibility of the ordered, the spectacular and the dull. Our visual credo in this book was to find a viewer's antidote to what Tarun Bhartiya has called the "belching of excited news anchors".

The book itself has its genesis in the Crisis/Media Workshop that was jointly organized in Delhi by Sarai-CSDS, Delhi and the Waag Society, Amsterdam, a year ago in March 2003. The concept, outlined in the workshop publication by Shuddhabrata Sengupta and Geert Lovink, was a response to 9/11, the invasion of Afghanistan, the violence in Gujarat and the Kargil war. Over 3 days, participants from many different parts of South Asia and the world gathered to debate and dissect the relationship between the notion of crisis and the media, exactly one year after Gujarat had gone up in flames, and just as the 'Coalition of the Willing' was gearing up to bomb Baghdad. The process of editing the Reader only confirmed what we felt that the workshop had already set in motion – an unruly but very necessary set of forays into the realm of 'the unspeakable'. Our contributors were opening out new spaces for dialogue, not only by inaugurating discussion on things that had hitherto been left unsaid, but also in the way that different elements were speaking to each other. Our task was to enable this conversation to interrupt itself, to make all sorts of unruly connections, to foster linkages between disparate truths and conflicting claims to attention.

As the emails bearing texts from all over the world thickened our inboxes in response to the call for proposals, it became apparent that apart from the magisterial register that had raised the bar of discourse at the Crisis/Media Workshop, we were going to have to listen to a new set of unruly voices. Often, these voices belonged to unauthorized interlocutors. They came from within the vortices of crises. They were voices of witnesses; voices that were young, voices that were trying themselves out and that were often excluded from communicative entitlement. In times of crisis, the temptation to go for the ordered, predictable voice of authority is often paramount. In this collection, we have tried to resist this temptation, and let the crisis in the contents be.

This book brings together media professionals, activists, critics, writers and scholars in order to create a dialogue between different kinds of approaches to the question of communication itself. It examines how popular culture and cinema 'memorialize' crisis situations, or create the conditions for selective amnesia. Most of all, this book recognizes that there is a crisis in and of the media, and this cannot be addressed simply by calling for less reportage and more analysis. Instead, we argue for analysis in the reportage, and a disruption of the apparatus of centralized and centralizing information networks. We need to break down the same images that everyone sees, worldwide, in many different ways. And we need to find new ways to tell stories, and to distribute the untold story. The problem of critical media analysis of global crises so far has been to deconstruct the ownership of media and its ideological agenda, attempting to uncover a 'truth' of state and corporate control behind the news. The book, by and large, takes this for granted, and hopes that its readers will ask how we may go beyond it, and how alternative media too can stop looking and feeling like cheaply produced versions of mainstream media production.

As this book goes into print we find ourselves having to reflect on a situation here in India where communication, the very fact of saying things, is increasingly becoming fraught

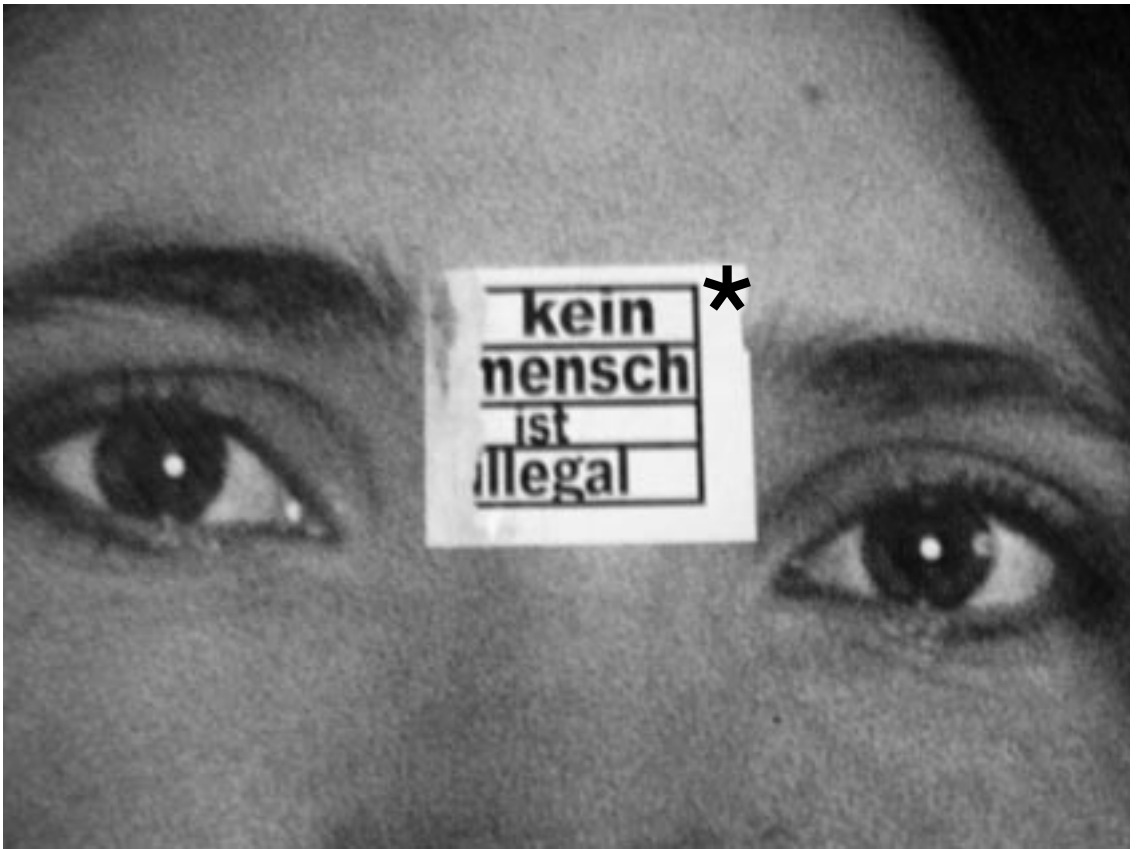
with difficult consequences. A festival of documentary filmmaking suddenly finds itself paralyzed by the spectre of censorship, books are banned, journalists and writers are imprisoned, overheard phone conversations lead to death sentences being pronounced, libraries get vandalized and paintings destroyed. Ideas and information, words and images, are beginning to be treated as if they were the vectors of an epidemic, which could unleash uncontrollable disasters on a vulnerable social body. While it flatters writers, media practitioners, journalists, filmmakers, artists and anyone who deals with ideas to be treated with such importance, only a paranoid society demands such fealty to the writ of the censor. Perhaps it is time for us to ask whether we are beginning to live in such societies, and whether we are willing to continue doing so. The exiled Bangladeshi writer, Taslima Nasrin, whose essay "Homeless Everywhere", written in response to the ban on her recent volume of memoirs, *Dwikhandito (Broken)* in West Bengal, says, "Riots don't break out because of what I write. Whatever happens, happens in my life. I am the one who is punished for what I write. Fires rage in my home. I am the one who has to suffer exile. I am the one who is homeless everywhere".

The moderate, safe, domesticated voice can never be the only register in which an illiberal, immoderate, chaotic, insane world can stumble towards its provisional truths. Those who speak with passion often do so with the sober awareness of its consequences on their lives. By seeking to suppress these voices, the mandarins of the moment only seek to take detours away from the fact that utterance is the ground where every crisis seeks its first consciousness of itself. It is perhaps with this in mind that Lawrence Liang says, "Very often the assumption of desirable forms of speech presumes a pre-tailored relationship between media and the properly constituted public sphere (much like the imagination of the seamless web), and a plea to the state to rule out undesirable forms of speech abandons the site of politics and converts it into a site of regulation that will merely heighten the crisis rather than resolve it".

But the contemporary moment is also marked by a festive excess of what the mandarins consider 'undesirable forms of speech'. And so, we have filmmakers deciding to challenge the sterility of an official festival with their own alternative festival. We have writers putting their banned writings on the web, for anyone to download. We have independent media coalitions come together when necessary and disappear into anonymity when their visibility becomes a handicap. The world has changed, but ways of talking about it have changed as well.

This book welcomes and celebrates this change. It carries with it the unreasonable expectation that the myriad realities that seek to make themselves known in a world that usually silences them, will find voice, and that we will all find the wherewithal, and the patience, to listen very carefully.

Editorial Collective
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* No One Is Illegal

Approaching CRISIS