CALL FOR PAPERS

“CRISIS AND CRITIQUE”
Keynote speaker: to be announced shortly

An interdisciplinary, graduate student conference at
The Institute for Comparative Literature and Society
Columbia University, New York
4 April 2015

To participate, please send a 250-word abstract for a 20 minute presentation by 15 January 2015 to crisisandcritique2015@gmail.com

What are the links between methods of critique today and moments of historical and disciplinary crisis?

Three examples:

• In June of 2009, the Royal Spanish Academy convened to update their dictionary, accommodating expanded usages for 200 words. The terms (burbuja; prima de riesgo) belonged to a nomenclature of precarity that was forming around the financial crisis. The schematization of language is crucial to the experience of precarity: to name a crisis is to begin one.

• In August of 2014, Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, was shot by police in Ferguson, Missouri. Institutional narratives surrounding digital democracy and concepts of “right to the city” seem to fall short of capturing the stakes of such events, including the subsequent protests: how to articulate and address the ongoing crises of race or the rise of the police-state?

• In October 1930, Walter Benjamin, faced with the rising power of the German National Socialist party, ruled up some notes on a new journal, to be edited with his friend Bertolt Brecht, and to address ‘the critical situation at the foundation of today’s society’. It was to be called: Crisis and Critique.

Languages of critique often arise at moments of simultaneous semantic and material vulnerability. Words coined in times of crisis are often themselves symptoms of the disturbances they explicate. Distress produces language, and our language is likewise fraught with distress.

This Conference will be an occasion to reflect upon the artillery of concepts and techniques that our respective disciplines today offer us, as scholars, in the practice of critique. Disciplines always have their crises; they are likewise compelled to respond to crises. In our training, we inherit grammars premised on abstraction—when are they faulty, when do they support us, and when do they break down?

Contributors will be asked to articulate the requirements and limits for a method of critique that belongs to this second decade of the 21st century.

We invite contributors from all fields. We imagine this conference as a collaborative project. We will have no parallel panels: instead, participants will be encouraged to attend all talks and, with speakers, respondents, and keynote, work together to formulate answers to the questions raised above.

Graph showing frequency of words ‘critique’ and ‘crisis’ in Google books in English from 1800 to 2014 (Google Books Ngram Viewer, http://books.google.com/ngrams)