**Media & Materiality: Category Crisis and Transitional Moments in East Asia and Eastern Europe**

Part of the “Crisis, Uncertainty, and History: Trajectories and Experiences of Accelerated Change” Program at the Center for Historical Research at The Ohio State University

March 3rd-March 5th, 2022

The language of "crisis" is pervasive in our neoliberal pandemic world, but the term is so capacious as to demand more rigorous scrutiny to become critically useful. The goal of our symposium is to theorize what crisis means at the level of lived experience, in the media and in the materialties that create historical subjectivities and relationalities. In other words, what happens when the mediated environments that we are enmeshed in are suddenly forced to function differently? When categories understood as structures (of feeling) and (medium) specificities come into question? Furthermore, if media and materialities mediate our experience, how do we account for media's own crises at moments of historical shock? For example, what can we learn if we consider that the inflection point between socialism and postsocialism is also a moment in which film loses ground to video and data? How do we read a doubly critical crisis when the very thing that anchors us in specific historical life worlds changes at the same moment in which social structures shift? We are eager to untangle these interrelated meanings of crisis by turning to East Asia and Eastern Europe, two locales in which much of the 20th century was experienced as crisis and shock and whose careful study can help us develop historical methods and theoretical tools necessary to understand an age of crisis.

All times are given in eastern time. Registration links to events held on each day:

**3/3/22: Keynote**

<https://osu.zoom.us/meeting/register/tJIkdu-sqDovHd0Lg2vxbeTKw8hljxU-sfPS>

**3/4/22: Panels 1-3**

<https://osu.zoom.us/meeting/register/tJIodu2qqDMoGtdiCFrAgXfJr8XMuXA4VXl->

**3/5/22: Panel 4 and Methods Workshop**

<https://osu.zoom.us/meeting/register/tJEvcOuhpjojEtyjrcCrxMIDOt0mid4Hej9H>

**A detailed schedule of the symposium proceedings follows on the next pages (2-3).**

**Full abstracts of all papers included begin on page 4.**

**This event is cosponsored by the OSU Global Arts and Humanities Discovery Theme, the CHR, the Department of History, the East Asian Center, and the Slavic, East European and Eurasian Center**

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**Thursday, March 3rd KEYNOTE AND INTRODUCTIONS**

5:00 PM Introductions and preliminary comments

5:30 PM Keynote Speech

* Prof. Suk-Young Kim, UCLA School of Theater, Film & Television
  + “Crisis Over Free Choice: Reading *Squid Game*Comparatively as a Millennial Parable”

**Friday, March 4th PANEL PRESENTATIONS**

9:00-9:30 Virtual breakfast chit chat

9:30-11:00 Panel 1: Hardware, Software, and the Limits of Convenience

* Jianqing Chen, Washington University in St. Louis
  + “Building the ‘Eight Vertical and Eight Horizontal’ Fiber-Optic Core Network in Historical Upheavals”
* Diane Wei Lewis, Washington University in St. Louis
  + “Women and the Software Crisis in Japan”
* Joshua Neves, research done in collaboration with Marc Steinberg, Concordia University
  + “In-Convenience”

11:00-1:00 Lunch break

1:00-2:30 Panel 2: Crisis Structures

* Victoria Lupascu, University of Montreal
  + “Where Can Patients Go When the Hospital Is Closed? Multilayered Crisis in the Romanian Medical System”
* Damian Mandzunowski, University of Freiburg
  + “Reading Through What Crises? Volume 5 of Mao’s Selected Works as Calming Medium in a Changing Socialist China”
* Edward Tyerman, University of California, Berkeley
  + “The Eternal Crisis of the Peripheral Empire: Vladimir Sorokin’s World System”

2:30-3:00 Coffee/tea break

3:00-4:00 Panel 3A: The Postsocialist Potentialities of Victor and Valter

* Dragan Batancev, Concordia University
  + “Cinema as a Catalyst of Chinese Soft Power in the Postsocialist Balkans”
* Steven Lee, University of California, Berkeley
  + "Deterritorialized Nationality: Viktor Tsoi Saves the World"

4:00-5:00 Panel 3B: Across the Great Divides

* Nicolai Volland, The Pennsylvania State University
  + “What’s in (an) Epoch? Cosmopolitanism and Internationalism in China Across the 1949 Divide”
* Travis Workman, University of Minnesota
  + “From Imperial to Postcolonial Cinema in Early Cold War Korea”

5:00 Concluding remarks

**March 5th ARCHIVES, METHODS, MATERIALS**

9:00-9:30 Virtual breakfast chit chat

9:30-11:00 Panel 4: Of Books and Dusty Digits

* Xiaoyu Xia, University of California, Berkeley
  + “Alternative Technologies of Tagging and Tracking: Liang Qichao, Genre Fiction, and the Transformation of Literary Taxonomy in Late Qing China”
* Lara Yang, University of Freiburg
  + “Dust Hunters in the Confucius.com Era: How the Internet Changed the Identity Ecology of Second-hand Book Culture in China”
* Julia Keblinska, The Ohio State University
  + “(Un)Bricking the *Apocalypse*: Towards a Second Run Archive”

11:00-12:30 Methods and Materials Roundtable with Invited Guests

12:30-1:00 Virtual lunch and concluding remarks

**Full abstracts for all papers attached begin on the next page.**

**KEYNOTE**

March 3rd, 5:30

**Crisis Over Free Choice: Reading *Squid Game*Comparatively as a Millennial Parable**

*Suk-Young Kim, UCLA School of Theater, Film & Television*

Through the birth canal of despair, the era of the pandemic has arrived. It has brought about the symbiotic sense of an imminent end and a new beginning. We have witnessed the unprecedented growth of digital connectivity alongside the possibility of environmental and pandemic-induced societal collapse. How does a comparative perspective on media interpellate these matters? How do material traces of everyday media consumption measure the pulse of our times?  Putting our ears closer to the heartbeat of today’s media, symptoms of the pandemic era prominently emerge in recurring soundwaves and visions: an eschatological vision of the world, the precarity of human life, the ethics of medicine, crisis of the Anthropocene, and the ubiquitous presence of surveillance mechanisms mitigated by the horrors and wonders of technology. No other production in recent years has embraced the notion of crisis as its central focus more viscerally than *Squid Game*. This talk discusses Netflix’s latest global hit as a millennial parable on the impossibility of free choice, the futility of human willpower, and the uneven rise of new cultural networks amidst ever intensifying global streaming wars. By focusing on the show’s global circulation from a comparative perspective, this talk confronts the threshold moment of the current pandemic when digital transformations and accelerated sociopolitical changes have been compressed to complicate our vision of the future.

**PANEL 1: HARDWARE, SOFTWARE, AND THE LIMITS OF CONVENIENCE**

March 4, 9:30-11:00

**Building the ‘Eight Vertical and Eight Horizontal’**

**Fiber-Optic Core Network in Historical Upheavals**

*Jianqing Chen, Washington University in St. Louis*

As China planned the restarting of its economy in early March 2020, central leaders coin the terms “new infrastructures” or “digital infrastructures” and boosted the development of 5G wireless network infrastructures to the top of the national agenda to kickstart the economic recovery. This paper excavates the overdue forgotten history of these “new” digital infrastructures, tracing the genesis and growth of Chinese wireless and mobile networks infrastructures back to the late 1980s. I adumbrate the two-phrase development of the first- tier inter-provincial optical backbone network, namely the “Eight Vertical and Eight Horizontal Fiber-optic Grid,” within the vicissitude of Sino-American technological cooperation and competition that emerged in the final decade of the Cold War era (the 1980s) and intensified with the rise of neoliberalism (since the 1990s). My archaeology of the fiber-optic core network reveals the current wireless systems as a mixture of wireless and wired networks, old and new systems, renegotiating intractable historical ruptures and upheavals of Cold War/Post-Cold War and socialism/post-socialism.

**Women and the Software Crisis in Japan**

*Diane Wei Lewis, Washington University in St. Louis*

In the late-1960s, software projects ran behind schedule and over budget, firms faced labor shortages, and after-delivery maintenance often exceeded original development costs. Responding to this “software crisis,” computer scientists like Frederick Brooks and Edsger Dijkstra pushed for standardized tools, reusable components, and professionalization. They argued that a new approach—“software engineering”—would transform the messy “craft” of software development into an efficient, predictable “science.” Brooks’s and Dijkstra’s recommendations contributed to the masculinization of programming, obscuring the historical importance of women programmers. In Japan, however, women were *more*in demand as companies attempted to improve reliability and cost-efficiency. This paper examines gendered hiring at Japanese software firms in the 1980s, including use of outsourcing and temporary employees. The rhetoric of “crisis” helped rationalize women’s increasing numbers in software, maintain the low cost of their labor, and minimize their importance. Attention to the “soft” aspects of computerization allows us to recuperate their contributions.

**In Convenience**

*Joshua Neves, Concordia University*

\*This presentation draws on a collaborative research project with my colleague Marc Steinberg examining the culture and politics of in/convenience.

The felt sense that we inhabit a convenience economy and culture is by now widespread. Nested in this understanding are ideas about ease and comfort, perpetually new technologies, and empowered consumers, on the one hand, and growing inequalities and frictions between the speed and exhaustion that convenience engenders, on the other. While conveniences involve the social production of inequality, a focus on ease, time, and technologized efficiency are not sufficient to grasp and critique this shared sense of a divided world. Convenience is a condition we inhabit within contemporary capitalism, and must be submitted to rigorous analysis, historical and conceptual. That even proponents of radical politics assume that convenience will be part of a post-capitalist society, suggests the relational nature of what we term in convenience. Responding to this condition requires us to think beyond simply not clicking “buy now." This project gives particular attention to East Asia, including the Japanese convenience store, Chinese e-commerce, and related techno-aesthetic practices – from home delivery (Amazon, Alibaba, Flipkart, Rakuten), personal mobility (Uber, Didi), video delivery (Netflix, Mubi, Tudou), super apps (WeChat, LINE), and even perhaps social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok).

**PANEL 2: CRISIS STRUCTURES**

March 4, 1:00-3:00

**The Eternal Crisis of the Peripheral Empire: Vladimir Sorokin’s World System**

*Edward Tyerman, University of California, Berkeley*

Historical consciousness in contemporary Russia has been shaped by a sense of recurring crisis, from the Time of Troubles of the seventeenth century to the revolutions of the early twentieth century and the economic and social catastrophe of the post-Soviet 1990s. While this cyclical recurrence of crisis often feeds narratives of Russian historical uniqueness, the Marxist economic historian Boris Kagarlitsky has recently deployed the theoretical paradigm of world-systems theory to argue that Russia’s crisis-laden history should be understood as a result of the particular position that this “peripheral empire” has occupied in the modern capitalist world-system. Russia’s crises, for Kagarlitsky, are externally, not internally generated.

In this paper, I contend that Kagarlitsky’s historical analysis finds its literary counterpart in the speculative fiction of Vladimir Sorokin. Sorokin’s fiction from the 2000s imagines a future Russia that has thrown off Western cultural influence and created a neo-traditional, quasi-medieval state, combining the social order of Ivan the Terrible’s Muscovy with modern technology. What Sorokin’s vision shares with Kagarlitsky’s analysis, however, is the sense that this assertively neo-traditional Russia, which claims to have restored stability and eradicated crisis, remains embedded in a particular position within the world system and thus subject to forces beyond its control. In Sorokin, this destabilizing element takes the form of the increased economic and cultural power of China: while proclaiming its cultural isolation from the West, this future Russia has been penetrated from the East by the Paris-Guangzhou Highway, a vast transit corridor that moves Chinese goods to Europe. The destabilizing effect of China’s rise indicates that, like the reign of Ivan the Terrible, this period of heightened state power may yet be followed by another Time of Troubles.

**Where Can Patients Go When the Hospital Is Closed?**

**Multilayered Crisis in the Romanian Medical System**

*Victoria Lupascu, University of Montreal*

On January 1st 1990, the National Salvation Party/Front announced that Romania became a democracy and that it has already begun its transition towards a fully-fledged neoliberal economy, especially since the former communist ruler, Nicolae Ceausescu, was no longer in power. What they failed to announce was the simultaneous beginning of a deep crisis spanning over multiple systems and decades.

This presentation focuses on the transformations in the Romanian medical system from early 1990s to the present moment and argues that the language of crisis highlighted in the state sponsored media became overused and ultimately failed to describe the relationality between people’s lived experiences of diseases, their understanding of and positioning toward the medical system and the historical changes in medical infrastructure during periods of transition. I draw on films such as “The Death of Mister Lăzărescu” by Cristian Puiu, “Collective” by Alexander Nanau and short investigative documentaries about closed or unequipped hospitals, as well as on series of articles published in state-sponsored media on the reform in the medical system to analyze the disjunction between individual and national perception of crisis as transition.

**Reading Through What Crises?**

**Volume 5 of Mao’s Selected Works as Calming Medium in a Changing Socialist China**

*Damian Mandzunowski, University of Freiburg*

On April 15, 1977, the much-delayed fifth volume of the *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* was published. Twenty years had passed since the preceding volume came out in 1960; twenty years during which radical changes turned upside down what stood solid thus far. Only in 1976 three top leaders died—including, of course, Mao himself—and four other politburo members were arrested and accused of highest counterrevolutionary crimes. Hua Guofeng, the heir-apparent and new CCP Chairman, faced an uphill battle to win over the party immersed in factional divisions and the people after years of Cultural Revolutionary struggles. This paper proposes to look at volume 5 of Mao’s *Selected Works* as a calming medium applied by Hua and his supporters to counteract the growing crises. Being personally responsible for the editorial work, Hua took a central role in the ensuing mass campaign propagating the publication. Photographs and other visual media communicated the message that with Hua in charge, all is at ease. Then, organized group reading activities at all work units were to bring that notion down to the readers. Thus, by symbolically transforming the very materiality of the printed book, harmony was to be restored and the spirit of Mao to manifest in Hua.

**PANEL 3A: THE POSTSOCIALIST POTENTIALITIES OF VICTOR AND VALTER**

March 4, 3:00-4:00

**Cinema as a Catalyst of Chinese Soft Power in the Postsocialist Balkans**

*Dragan Batancev, Concordia University*

*Valter Defends Sarajevo*(1972), a legendary Yugoslav war film, was one of the most popular foreign films in post-Mao China. This presentation examines the instrumentalization of the film’s popularity in relations between East Asia and postsocialist Eastern Europe. The film’s star, Velimir Živojinović, was credited with bringing in Chinese investments for large infrastructural projects in Serbia. In 2019, a Valter Museum was opened in Sarajevo with the explicit aim of attracting more Chinese tourists to the region. Chinese tourists are also targeted by the Balkan *Valter*-themed restaurants. In 2020, China’s CCTV6 broadcast the film in an expression of support for the Balkan struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic. Soon thereafter, Serbia provided a significant number of vaccines, including donated Sinopharm, for citizens of neighboring countries. This marked an important moment in rebuilding solidarity between Serbia and Bosnia & Herzegovina after the 1990s collapse of Yugoslavia, all the more poignant in view of the film’s legacy.

**Deterritorialized Nationality: Viktor Tsoi Saves the World**

*Steven Lee, University of California, Berkeley*

This paper uses Alexei Yurchak's account of late socialist performance and the deterritorialization of authoritative discourses to explain the difficulty of pinning down the (half-)Korean identity of Viktor Tsoi, the most prominent rock start emerging from the late Soviet period.  The talk touches on the history of Koreans in the Soviet Union as well as readings of Tsoi's music and films, and argues that deterritorialization allowed for flexible understandings of race and nationality--a flexibility resonating with Birmingham School accounts of subcultures and "new ethnicities," but reappearing more recently in the more sinister form of Russian trolling.

**PANEL 3B: ACROSS THE GREAT DIVIDES**

March 4, 4:00-5:00

**What’s in (an) Epoch? Cosmopolitanism and Internationalism in China Across the 1949 Divide**

*Nicolai Volland, The University of Pennsylvania*

The Chinese Communist Party’s takeover and the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 constitute not only a major rupture in China’s modern history, but also an acute crisis in China’s positionality in a global cultural and epistemological context. How to define the nation’s position vis-à-vis and relations with the world beyond its borders posited a major challenge for actors and agents within China as well as abroad. In this presentation, I will parse the matrix of internationalism and cosmopolitanism, and propose that efforts to define transnational cultural relations remained entangled with forces including residual and resurgent nationalism, fluid Cold War constellations, and a dynamic public and media space. I will do so by tracing the fortunes of the Epoch Press (Shidai chubanshe), a hugely influential but relatively unknown player in Sino-Soviet cultural interactions, and by focusing on Epoch’s changing catalog of publications from 1941 through roughly 1960.

**From Imperial to Postcolonial Cinema in Early Cold War Korea**

*Travis Workman, University of Minnesota*

1945 was a year of crisis in Korean history. With the end of World War II, Korea was liberated from 35 years of Japanese colonial rule. However, the peninsula was immediately divided into Soviet and US zones of occupation, and a UN trusteeship was never formed. By 1948, a revolutionary communist state (DPRK) was established in the North and an anticommunist state (ROK) was established in the South. In both the late Japanese empire and this early Cold War period, cinema was an essential medium for narrating and visualizing political and social subjectivity. Although Cold War narratives of national cinema in both Koreas proclaimed a clean break from Japanese colonial rule, a materialist media history spanning the early and late 1940s reveals fascinating continuities across the colonial Korean, North Korean, and South Korean industries. By examining this decade of crisis on the Korean peninsula through cinema history—including form, style, mode, technology, and artists’ careers—this paper will reflect on how a cinema and media studies approach to social and political crisis can open up new interpretations of the structures and affects of late imperial and postcolonial subjectivities.

**PANEL 4: OF BOOKS AND DUSTY DIGITS**

March 5, 9:30-11:00

**Alternative Technologies of Tagging and Tracking:**

**Liang Qichao, Genre Fiction, and the Transformation of Literary Taxonomy in Late Qing China**

*Xiaoyu Xia, University of California, Berkeley*

This paper examines how the Chinese narrative form, xiaoshuo, was assimilated into a Western model of “fiction.” Placing this generic transition in a larger transformation of literary taxonomy in late Qing China, I inspect a peculiar way of formatting fiction—the attachment of a two-lined genre tag atop a story’s title—a format that was popular in Meiji Japan and late Qing China. I show how the preeminent reformer Liang Qichao introduced these tags from Japan to China, with which he transplanted a new taxonomy of genres and a new vision of fiction into Chinese literature. Taking these tiny tags as a crucial nodal point of typographic, intellectual, and literary histories, this paper also asks how we might resist computational literary analysis’ tendencies to impose an ahistorical notion of text—and how we might learn from Liang Qichao an alternative method of tagging and tracking.

**Dust Hunters in the Confucius.com Era: How the Internet Changed the Identity Ecology of Second-hand Book Culture in China**

*Lara Yang, University of Freiburg*

A bibliophile of second-hand books inevitably focuses on the defects and alterations to a book, since it is these qualities that make it as “second-hand”. I define these alterations as “dust”. Travelling between the anonymous hands of dust hunters, including book sellers, buyers, garbage dealers and librarians etc., it is the dust that gradually remoulds each copy of a second-hand book via wear, marks and stains. For this paper, I have coined the term “dust hunter” for second-hand book readers. It is drawn from *taoshuren*, or book-hunting man, a popular term which often appears in written texts in the modern Chinese context and refers to readers – mostly male - who actively hunt for books. When a second-hand book is digitised, however its physicality – its dust – is lost in the virtual world. How, then, do dust hunters engage with the material aspects of a book through digital platforms?

**(Un)Bricking the *Apocalypse*: Towards an Archive of the Second Run**

*Julia Keblinska, The Ohio State University*

Tadeusz Konwicki’s *A Minor Apocalypse* appeared in the magazine *Zapis*, a publication of Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza (NOWA), an independent publisher active in the late socialist period,in 1979. This paper examines the short novel’s narrative, a “day in the life” of an intellectual asked by his colleagues to self-immolate in protest of the government, in conjunction with the book’s history as a precarious object in the lead up to the declaration of martial law, the historical turn of the 1980s that for many, augured a “major” apocalypse, the collapse of socialism. The original publication as well as it’s many its copies produced by other “second run,” i.e. unofficial, publishers, are now littered across used bookstores and websites across the world. Some versions fetch hundreds and even thousands of dollars, while others fester, forgotten among piles of less notable late socialist publications, waiting perhaps, for the researcher willing to find them. My presentation thus ends the symposium’s formal panels through examination of several such volumes, once bricked up behind walls to evade the *milicja* (socialist police), then dumped in antiquarian bookshops, and now unearthed to serve as a catalogue of crisis media.