

“Resilience”

The three most common reactions to the word “resilience” in academic circles are probably 1. “we need resilience now more than ever”; 2. “I hate the word with a passion”; and 3. “how do you understand the notion exactly?” In the 21st century, resilience has become a ubiquitous term without a unified definition, which is both the strength of the concept—its metaphorical and kinetic richness—and its inevitable danger as it becomes subject to neoliberal appropriation and moral injunctions. From the ductility of matter in engineering to the persistence of ecosystems in environmental studies, resilience connotes ideas of elasticity, adaptability and resistance that meet our growing anxieties about human shock-absorption and the continuity of self or community beyond trauma. But it also raises a host of questions around fundamental dualities of structure and thought, such individual vs. collective, optimism vs. pessimism, and observation vs. action.

In light of the polymorphous readings of resilience today, this seminar session will attempt to trace the term’s history across disciplines in order to shed light on its contemporary uses in the humanities as a rich network of near-synonyms and metaphors. In particular, it will consider the possibility of looking at resilience through performance, using examples from the contemporary American stage and suggesting that theater, an embodied art with Ancient roots and supple boundaries, can offer a revealing—and perhaps an alternative—image of the 21st century’s “resilient turn.”

Julie Vatain-Corffdir is Associate Professor of English at Sorbonne Université and a Junior Fellow of the Institut Universitaire de France. She has published extensively on the poetics of contemporary American theater as well as dramatic translation, and is one of the scientific coordinators of the ACTiF ANR program. She has translated plays by Thornton Wilder, Sarah Ruhl, Richard Nelson, Tina Howe, Susan Glaspell and Lindsey Ferrentino for the French stage.