Hispania Guest Editorial:
Film as a Hinge:
The Present State and Future
Directions of Hispanic Studies

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**Guest Editorial**

**Film as a Hinge:**  
**The Present State and Future Directions of Hispanic Studies**

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Considering the field of Hispanic Studies in the widest sense possible, it is crucial to recognize this: what we say about film—how we approach it methodologically, what room we make for it in our undergraduate teaching, our PhD and MA programs, our peer-reviewed journals, our notions of canon, our new hires, and our profession as a whole—will determine our future relevance and success.

It is becoming ever more clear that among our future directions there are two to which we must pay close attention. The first, as always, is to continue to deliver our hallmark expertise in language proficiency and cultural competence as a way of preparing students for the global diversity they will encounter in the twenty-first-century workplace, whether abroad or domestically at any local scale. Immersive experience with humanities texts will continue to be a crucial part of this training, as will close readings, critical analyses, and discussions of the larger sociocultural issues these texts make possible.

The second direction, however, is just as crucial as the first. The increased visibility of non-traditional forms of cultural production such as popular music, performance, graphic novels, videogames, digital media, and interest in cultural practices previously considered the domain of the social sciences—in addition to the spread of digital humanities and cultural studies methods—is changing the nature of what it means to be a humanities teacher-scholar. The continued rise of interdisciplinary fields (such as disability studies, gender and sexuality studies, science fiction studies, urban studies, and so on), as well as the increased connections between the humanities and the humanities-related social sciences (Anthropology, Geography, Sociology, and so on), has placed the relative autonomy of humanities disciplines in question. If we continue to give the majority of our attention to traditional forms of literary scholarship at the expense of these new directions we risk the success of our students and relevance of our very discipline.

The increasing economic and political pressures placed on higher education—its own trend away from relative autonomy toward a greater dependence on market forces—will only exacerbate this need to be more interdisciplinary. This is not a call to stop advocating for the humanities. We need advocates today more than ever before. Instead, it is a call to analyze the way in which our potential is restricted by disciplinary prejudices internal to Hispanic Studies that imagine the field somewhat narrowly. Today students need not only linguistic, cultural, and critical thinking skills, but also digital skills and an interdisciplinary perspective on how language and culture inform a wide array of professions and broader sociocultural issues.

It is imperative to recognize that there is already much momentum in specialty journals surrounding film and other relatively novel directions. Yes, there is at least one journal dedicated specifically to Hispanic film; yes, there are numerous Hispanic cultural studies journals that have widened the scope of our field; and, certainly, there are general journals that over the last...
few decades seem to have devoted more space to film articles—Hispania included. But touting
the success of non-traditional literary perspectives observed at the small scale hides the lack
of consensus on these issues we encounter at the large scale. I continue to believe that working
toward a large-scale consensus on this and other related issues in Hispanic Studies is crucial.

Allow me to be frank. My observation is that within our own discipline there are battles
between those who advocate for a more open and inclusive approach to diverse cultural products
and varied approaches to language and culture on one hand, and, on the other, those, both
senior and junior scholars alike it should be noted, who would seek to preserve the field’s histori-
cally literary focus against perceived threats. Some teacher-scholars may perceive these threats
in non-traditional literary approaches, interdisciplinary approaches, digital approaches, social
science approaches and more. This perspective potentially impacts everything from curricular
reform to peer-review processes, and from hiring decisions to tenure and promotion processes.
As recent discussions on canon formation in Hispanic Studies reveal (see the ADFL Bulletin 43.1
[2014]), we still have some thinking to do if we want to fully incorporate film into our disciplinary
identity at the widest possible scale.

How can we continue to assert the crucial relevance of Hispanic Studies in the twenty-first-
century world if the twentieth-century topic of film alone gives many pause? Other traditionally
language and literature fields (e.g., French and German) have arguably done a better job of
digesting new perspectives and new forms of cultural production, perhaps because they have had
to do so in order to survive. Will there come a moment when, looking backward, we recognize
that the sustained strength of enrollments in Spanish relative to these other fields may have
prevented us from seeing the urgency of connecting systematically and programmatical-
ly with new forms of culture and with insights drawn from other disciplines?

Film in this context is not just film: it is a hinge.

Conceived as a hinge, the question of film will potentially lead us away from restrictive
notions of a purely literary culture that may indeed jeopardize our full participation in a
twenty-first-century educational paradigm. Even if it has not yet come clearly into focus, there
is no question that this twenty-first-century paradigm prioritizes interdisciplinary research and
teaching along with technological expertise. How we respond to the question of film will, to a
large degree, determine how willing we are as a wider field to resolve other issues of disciplinary
shift, whether they regard insights from other disciplines, interdisciplinary fields, professional
tracks, or other non-traditional forms of cultural production.

From this perspective, Hispania’s Special Issue on Film and Film Studies (98.3) is an
important step in reframing the widest-possible disciplinary dialogue regarding our scope of
practice. It is a sorely needed spark that holds the potential to galvanize existing interest, not
only interest in film but also interest in addressing the shape of our shared potential futures.
With Hispania’s central positioning in the profession comes a certain amount of disciplinary
responsibility. This is responsibility for establishing a dialogue, for setting a tone; this entails a
commitment to tackling the big questions we face as teacher-scholars of Hispanic Studies directly.
Let me be clear: this is a responsibility not to resolve intradisciplinary conflicts, but rather to
call our attention to them.

From where I sit, Hispania’s Film issue has done just that.

Here I believe it is important to admit a distinction between general and specialist journals.
At times I have found myself reminding colleagues and scholars from across the field that
Hispania is not a specialist journal. Instead, it is the most widely disseminated peer-reviewed
journal in the broad field of Hispanic Studies. It does not make sense for such a journal to cater
to one form of cultural production over another, one time period or regional setting or another,
or one interdisciplinary perspective or methodological commitment or another. This is not a
lack of focus, but rather, a strength. In this sense, Hispania takes the pulse of our discipline as
a whole in a way that no specialist journal could ever hope to do. Connected with this is the
reality that—and here we have the downside of any truly general journal—oftentimes specialists
working on topics that are perceived as being more marginal to the profession may choose to
direct their submissions elsewhere. Now, more than ever, this is a mistake. I urge such special-
ists to consider how the profession can benefit from their involvement in discussions over the
future of the discipline, and I would say that the submissions published in this issue of *Hispania*
certainly constitute such involvement.

With this issue in particular, *Hispania* has sent a message that film is far from marginal. This is a major step for such a high-profile publication just as it is a major step for our field as a whole. To my eyes, it is a clear call for further commitment to explore the issues I have outlined above. It is a model for those other general journals in the field of Hispanic Studies that may be dealing with similar issues of disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity, with the growing proliferation of distinct and overlapping theoretical and methodological positions across the landscape of Hispanic Studies and with the increasing scholarly emphasis on a diverse range of cultural products.

As any editor will surely recognize, to these realities are linked issues not normally visible to the author of an individual submission. Such authors should and likely already do ask themselves: how do journals grapple with the increased diversity of Hispanic Studies approaches to language and culture at a practical level? How is the peer-review process made more problematic by the increasing turn toward interdisciplinary perspectives on disciplinary work?

But such questions are, of course, not merely for editors and authors alone. As intimated above, hiring departments must consider similar questions when posting job ads, when selecting candidates, when supporting faculty members who are fortunate enough to find themselves among the dwindling ranks of those on the tenure track. At all secondary and post-secondary institutions, at the very least, language and culture department members—whether tenured, tenure track or non-tenure track; whether senior or junior—necessarily take positions on these issues as they revisit curricula, as they plan classes, as they work on program identity and on increasing student recruitment and student success.

The danger in all this is to think that this is merely a question of film. At the largest scale of discourse, film certainly remains a privileged and representative challenge for Hispanic Studies as a discipline in a way that may have no contemporary parallel in other language and culture areas. We need to make room in Hispanic Studies for film, that much is indisputable. But even more important is this: we need to radically reconfigure our field to maximize disciplinary relevance and student success in a shifting twenty-first-century landscape.

We need to understand that what we say about film is what we say about popular music, performance, graphic novels, video games, digital media, cultural studies, cultural practices of a wider disciplinary relevance and of course all manner of interdisciplinary connections. We have to think differently while sustaining our hallmark expertise through the shifts wrought by new paradigms of research and education. We must seek to collaborate across disciplines and work to build consensus within our own discipline about the benefits of doing so.

As I see it, the question posed through the publication of this special issue is not necessarily, “What promise does film hold?” Instead, the key question is, “What is Hispanic Studies, and where is it headed?” To answer this question, we will need to admit the variations of subject matter, methodological approach, and theoretical orientation that increasingly bring breadth, depth and relevance to our discipline, just as we must acknowledge the wider extradisciplinary forces with which our shared field is increasingly brought into contact.