The Big Picture: On the Expansiveness of Cinema and Media Studies

by Lucas Hilderbrand, editor

In the past couple of decades, scholars in cinema and media studies have importantly, if incompletely, expanded the range of media, objects, methods, and culturally situated perspectives—including international ones—that we study. Institutionally, this has been epitomized by the addition of “and Media” to the organization’s name (from SCS to SCMS) in 2002 and by the more recent proliferation of Scholarly Interest Groups to thirty-four SIGs by 2017 (a growth that has raised concerns that there are now “too many” SIGs).

But as the discipline and organization grow, have we simply become atomized into a plurality of smaller conversations? Do we still share unifying projects, sets of questions, and concerns? Would we even want to? How do we foster supportive intellectual communities that are essential for legitimating long-marginalized areas of study while not simply splintering into separate subfields that do not actually engage in dialogue or cohere? Does our work make an impact beyond our discipline? These questions developed for me out of conversations in recent years among a variety of colleagues.

Generational questions emerge as well. As the discipline “matures,” how do we understand its evolution? Do we still need to teach apparatus theory, for instance—and, if so, is it as intellectual history or as active theory? The recent expansion of new graduate programs has literally redrawn the map of schools of thought. The tenure-track academic job market, however, has not kept pace. So what should be (and in many ways is) invigorating for our discipline must also raise questions of professional ethics: for what kind of future are we training students? Meanwhile, a generation of leading scholars has been in the process of retiring. Whereas there used to be a fairly recognizable
star system of authors and canon in the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s—including Metz, Mulvey, Elsaesser, Dyer, Altman, Bordwell, Williams, Doane, Hansen, and Gunning—can one say that we have shared references today? Would it even be desirable for us to have such common scholarly texts? Or was it old-school cinema studies that was arguably myopic?

What could we learn from reading and talking more broadly? What is the most innovative and essential work being done now in cinema and media studies? What kind of work needs to be developed? Are we occupying isolationist bubbles in our microconversations? Beyond our discipline, the near-daily disorienting, seemingly implausible global political upheavals of 2016–2017 have made it all the more urgent to strategize how to sustain a long view, find purpose in our work, and not give in to pessimism. But how do we do that?¹

These are all sincere questions on my part. I don’t know the answers. Too often, I feel that the scholarship in our discipline is overly textually descriptive or citationally theoretical without having a clear sense of innovation, stakes, politics, intervention, perspective, or engagement beyond our friendly bubbles. Indeed, I’m not sure one could say that there are debates animating our field at present. We may be (over)due for a crisis of relevance, and perhaps it’s even time to take the pervasive attacks on the humanities as a cue to ask ourselves what we are doing and what we hope to do.

Surely these questions reflect my own perpetual existential crises (and anxieties about the significance of my own work) as much as disciplinary ones. Each of my degrees has been in film studies or cinema studies, although I have always identified with the cultural studies end of the spectrum. I consider myself amphibious in my research and teaching—moving between cinema and media, history and theory, formalism and cultural context. I alternately embrace and fear my own dilettantism for having written on video, documentary, underground cinema, pornography, and queer media of various formats as the impulse struck me; for several years, I’ve been researching a project on the history of gay male bars in the United States that bears no obvious connection to cinema and media at all. So my own position has been one of being both fully formed by our discipline and desiring to make it as capacious as possible.

Perhaps even more germane, my experience as faculty has shaped the impulse to ask these questions as well. At my university, my home is in the Department of Film and Media Studies, which offers an undergraduate major. Our graduate program is Visual Studies, a joint interdisciplinary and interdepartmental program with the Department of Art History; I recently directed this program for two years. My experience has made

¹ For me, the most compelling work either offers big-picture revelations or is idiosyncratically original; either way, such work offers new worldviews. The feedback I most frequently offer in reviewing manuscripts is to encourage authors to more audaciously foreground their voices and to cut back on the quotation of others. I give just two examples of areas that I have found to be important expansions of media studies. First is infrastructure studies, exemplified by Nicole Starosielski, The Undersea Network (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski, eds., Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015); and Tung-Hui Hu, A Prehistory of the Cloud (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015). Second is video-game studies, exemplified (to me, as someone who does not play them but considers them central to media culture) by Greig De Peuter and Nick Dyer-Witheford, Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009). What I have not seen our discipline foster as well are wildly eccentric but brilliant books that are possible in other fields, such as Paul B. Preciado’s Testo Junkie (New York: Feminist Press, 2013), originally published in Spanish in 2008.
me more aware of both the benefits of disciplinary grounding (knowing what you’re talking about) and the ways that disciplines can also limit one’s conceptual frameworks (the blindesses endemic to one’s own paradigms). I have also written curriculum assessments for both undergraduate and graduate programs for my university; this is exactly the kind of bureaucratic rationalization that so many of us resent having to do and dismiss as “neoliberal.” But as annoyed as I was by these administrative mandates on principle, I was also frustrated that our go-to categories, such as “critical thinking” and “visual analysis,” are essentially unmeasurable terms—and perhaps purposefully so. Perhaps more accurately, these categories represent qualitative rather than quantitative skills, which therefore elude such rationalization. My sense was that these assessments were empty exercises in which the programs could not fail to meet the learning outcomes and the rubrics were teleological by design. This made the labor feel doubly wasteful. Is it possible to resist such bureaucratic rationalization and still learn something useful about our discipline and pedagogy in the process? What if we rejected the structures but nonetheless took up the fundamental questions?

This is not the first In Focus to reflect on our discipline broadly. In a previous issue, responding to SCMS at fifty years, Rick Altman recalled that in its early days, cinema studies comprised scholars from a range of disciplines, training, and methods whose common project was unified by its object: cinema, which, before home video, was defined by a comparatively limited set of texts. In contrast, at the present moment, cinema and media studies might be considered a coherent discipline, while our media objects and platforms proliferate. In the same anniversary In Focus dossier, historians of our discipline seemed to concur that cinema studies came out of the leftist-liberal Marxism of the late 1960s and 1970s with the theoretical tools of semiotics and psychoanalysis, and our field became largely defined by feminist debates and interventions in the 1970s and 1980s. Jacqueline Stewart also offered an account of the difficulties of fostering well-intentioned pluralism in a discipline and professional academic society that were overwhelmingly white, as well as the challenges faced by identity-based caucuses attempting to support their members. These concerns about creating a collective endeavor that maintains some semblance of unity while remaining dynamically supportive of different methods, media, and constituencies seem more pertinent than ever.

Keeping in mind some of the generational queries mentioned earlier, I have solicited contributions from midcareer and junior scholars with a range of perspectives and investments rather than any figures from the old guard. By choice, I have included some scholars who would have joined SCMS well after the “and Media” had been added—and for whom the essentialness of the “and Media” was a given. I have also, as an antidote to my own Negative Nellie tendencies, sought out people whom I not only respect as whip smart but also admire for their enthusiasm for new ideas and frameworks. I sent each of the contributors a version of my questions but encouraged them to take the prompt as a starting-off point to potentially ask and answer their own

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questions. I’m happy to say that many of the contributors responded to the issue of the discipline’s expansion with a call to think *bigger*.

Hector Amaya calls for a rethinking of the basic organizational logic of the discipline away from medium specificity—a framework that makes less and less sense as our media converge and how we engage with them evolves—and toward new large-scale, humanist social, political, and environmental questions that reflect changing demographic and geographic realities.

In her contribution, Elena Gorfinkel reflects on the seemingly oppositional dynamics of our discipline’s past. In our present, she suggests, we see a proliferation of theoretical lenses and methods that reorient us away from such dichotomies in practice.

Jennifer Malkowski argues that we need to be more open to borders between research and teaching specialties rather than policing them—not just in terms of moving between media platforms but also in engaging colleagues beyond our discipline. In a word, she argues for dilettantism, which has been core to her own original research and to her daily life teaching at a small liberal arts college.

In conversation with approximately twenty other scholars, Sangita Gopal offers a polyvocal account of how we understand our discipline as a feminist project—and how feminist theory can continue to guide our critical practices even as the field seems to expand to new objects and questions.

Starting from the anxieties that reverberate on social media and in classrooms in our present, Hunter Hargraves suggests that thinking through the affects of media texts, particularly television, can provide new lenses for responding to the urgency of the political sphere. He also reminds us of what cultural studies can do when the world at large seems out of control.

This *In Focus* concludes with a rallying cry. Kristen J. Warner presents us with a hard truth: our discipline is virtually invisible in popular online media criticism, Twitter commentaries, and the world at large. She boldly urges us to “get our shit back” and make our contributions visible and relevant. Not only can we bring our expertise into the public sphere; doing so is the best way to ensure the continued vitality of our work and our ability to recruit young thinkers, particularly would-be scholars of color. *
A Discipline of Futures

by HECTOR AMAYA

At the University of Virginia, dean of arts and sciences Ian Baucom reminds faculty regularly that the most honorable part of our jobs is the preparation of citizens. For a dean to de-emphasize knowledge production or creativity to instead privilege citizenship is perhaps odd. A postcolonial English professor, the dean has become an ally of those of us wishing to glimpse the future of the humanities and humanistic social sciences. I like closing my eyes and doing that thinking, both because my Department of Media Studies is new at an old institution and because I have been the chair and thus in charge of defining who and what we are to others and to ourselves. So, what I write here is not an argument about the relevance of my expertise but an honest assessment of what I believe the field(s) under the SCMS umbrella should be about. I am referring here to film studies, media studies, and sections of English and communication studies. For simplicity, I call this media studies.

What these areas have in common is the unifying project of seeking to understand how technologically defined mediation shapes humans. The oldest of these fields, English, began to be formed as the publishing industry made its mark in national subjectivities and as scholars from a variety of disciplines such as theology, history, rhetoric, and philosophy formalized their common interest in books, literature, and the written text under the banner of English. In these departments, the age of the book became the age of literature, just as eventually the age of mass mediation (film, radio, and broadcasting) gave way to the first communication, media, and film studies departments, and the second instantiation of academic disciplines organized around a media technology. The intellectual concerns of these new disciplines often overlapped with English but were not fully enveloped by English. Other disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, and linguistics, joined English as influencers and neighboring disciplines of the new departments.

I start with these influences and disciplinary approximations because they offer important lessons to us today, lessons that can give us clarity as to how to approach the question about the future of the discipline. Where disciplines come from matters. Just as English departments are centered on the book, media studies, exemplified by the Radio-Television-Film Program at the University of Texas–Austin, where I was trained, largely organizes itself in terms of different media. Under this organization, faculty and students pursued only a fraction
of potential lines of inquiry, and the most limiting factor was understanding their specific media technology as having a discrete and even concrete nature. The book was different from film, which was different from radio, which was different from television. In the academic world in which I was trained, there were two significant exceptions to the possibility of media specialization that directly addressed the human. Thanks to the State Department’s concern with communism, some were able to also embrace an area studies specialization. Thanks to the influence of sociology and the rise of new knowledges from the 1960s onward, some could also specialize in studying a group of people, such as women, African Americans, and so on. For instance, I am a Latino media scholar (although I was hired to be a Latin American media studies scholar). All these are honorable designations, but they are also increasingly unhelpful ways of understanding our specializations and the ways we should partition our disciplines and objects of inquiry. The age of computers brought the age of convergence, and today organizing our disciplines by medium makes little sense. In the future our field will necessarily always start from the complexities of convergence, which will force us to redefine most of our theories, specializations, and objects of inquiry. We need to recognize the aging of our tools, which in many instances have become blunt, incapable of dissecting contemporary media. Yet the age of computers cannot simply be defined by technologically based inquiries. Old technologies are still relevant, and new ones seem to emerge every day. If we start with media technologies, as we used to, the sites of intellectual inquiry will multiply enormously, potentially fragmenting our disciplines and isolating growing numbers of microcommunities.

I believe that the future of the discipline will be about large organizing questions and thematic engagements that help us come together in new community structures and that these large organizing questions and themes will generally be multitechnological. We are seeing this with the large organizing question, how do new technologies transform individuals and the social?—a subject that brings together book specialists and Internet experts, historians and legal scholars, and textualist and infrastructure experts. We are likely to see the same with themes such as “interface” and “infrastructure,” which are becoming substitutes for audience, reception, and spectator analysis and sections of political economy and industry studies, respectively.

To prepare citizens, however, it is not enough that we teach them to understand their technological world. Our students live in a difficult age, and it is the job of our discipline to help them understand their media contexts and become better versions of themselves. When I imagine their world and the impact media have on them, I sometimes feel saddened. In their daily lives, media are used for bullying each other, for trolling, for hate. Social media exposes them to rape, homicide, assassination, and suicide. Brutal violence, fake news, hypersexualization, callous comments, and casually uttered hate speech have become their normal media world, which they cannot escape, because media are ubiquitous. These are reasons for sadness. But then I remember the impact my students will have in that media world, and I am reminded of the privilege of teaching in a highly sought-out major. What I decide to teach, what my department decides is the media studies curriculum, what our disciplines decide to research—these affect hundreds of thousands each year. And this is where the relevance of a fresh understanding of the human becomes useful.
Just as area studies addressed the problem of being human in specific locations and at specific times, we must reorganize our disciplinary commitments to humanistic and social science inquiries in terms of the sociohistorical phenomena shaping our basic assumptions about humans, including those that are helping us newly understand what it means to be a person, a citizen, a US American, a sexed being, a member of an ethnic or racial community, or an able-bodied individual. Some of these sociohistorical phenomena are already part of our disciplinary traditions, but there are myopias that seem to stop us from recognizing the relevance of some phenomena and myopias that make us believe that these phenomena belong to other disciplines. Perhaps I am naïve, but I don’t believe the large questions that confront humanity belong to other disciplines simply because these questions don’t present themselves to us centrally as media questions. I take inspiration from those who incorporated the issue of civil rights into the media studies curriculum and those who insisted, through their intellectual labor, that health and medicine were important enough to be among our objects of inquiry. Yet there are new social issues that we need to make central and new problems of science that need our systematic attention. Some of these have the potential of generating large questions or new themes that help us organize substantive intellectual inquiries and communities.

These issues and problems include the demographic changes to the United States; the challenge that massive migration brings to Western nations, including the United States of America; the erosion of the state of law in an increasing number of nation-states in Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia; the rapidly changing natural environment; and the increasing skepticism over the role of science, truth, and objectivity in our lives. Let me briefly explain what I mean for each of these problems that will no doubt redefine what it means to be human, first in the United States, then in the West, in the Global South, in the natural world, and in the academy.

In its present formation, media studies is ill prepared to teach a generation of students who will live in a United States in which nonwhites will be the majority. Yet the discipline continues treating scholarship that addresses nonwhites as niche, and, unsurprisingly, there are few incentives for doctoral programs to graduate more scholars ready to investigate this profound transformation. In 2014, Latino, African American, and Asian students surpassed non-Hispanic white students in public K–12 classrooms. More than a quarter of the children in the United States are Latinos, and the majority of these kids grow up in bilingual households. There are forty million Spanish speakers in the United States.

Confronting these realities helps me see the organizing of our academic departments and canonical inquiries as rooted in the fictions of white supremacy and monolingualism. As chair of my department, I paid attention to the academic job market and can report that I found fewer than ten jobs per year specifically seeking scholars addressing this problem, even though there are hundreds of media studies and communications jobs each year. I can also report that there are years in which not a single job seeking a scholar of Latino media is posted. Most media or communications studies departments in the United States do not have a single scholar who can understand Spanish and hence at least responsibly teach the massive field of Spanish-language
media. I understand that departments may wish to hire specialists on Latinos or African Americans or Asian Americans, but the fact that they have to frame their desire within a call for, say, new media, reproduces the fiction of white supremacy and monolingualism, and this fails to incentivize PhD programs to seek out students wanting to do this important work. What vision of citizenship do we, as a field, reproduce through our job calls? We are doing a gigantic disservice to this generation of undergrads when we don’t offer them the possibility to truly learn about the world in which they exist.

The world of our students is also being transformed by immigration worldwide. Never in the history of humanity have so many people uprooted themselves to seek safety, shelter, or economic prosperity elsewhere. This phenomenon is not likely to slow down, which means that we, as a field, have to be ready to investigate questions of immigration, transnational media, diasporic communities, and the affordances of new technologies for human mobility. In addition, because a portion of these migrations start in the Global South and end in developed nations, immigration is at the root of the reenergizing of nativism, fascism, and xenophobia and will likely be a factor in the further erosion of liberalism in the West. We need to be ready to understand these problems and their connection to media and discourse.

Part of the reason for these massive migrations is the erosion of the rule of law in many nation-states in the Global South. Yet a significant part of our canonical arsenal presupposes order, liberalism, democracy, and lawfulness. We owe it to ourselves to expand our theoretical tools and start rethinking our keywords, and, when needed, substitute for them terms and theories available from other social, legal, and political contexts. Instead of starting with the presumption of democracy, one must start with the role of colonialism in reproducing Western democracies. The West is not the future of the world, and our tools should not start with this presumption.

Other reasons for these massive migrations have to do with dramatic environmental changes, particularly in Africa. But these environmental changes are about to envelop us all, and we, like every other discipline in the academy, must make this an intellectual priority. As media studies scholars, we have to train our students through inquiries into how the natural environment is mediated and how public debates about the environment constitute a politics of ecology. Most of us were not trained to do this research, but we are a community of learners, and we must retrain ourselves. On this, we have no choice. Every department around the nation should have a conversation on how that department is going to contribute to the understanding of the natural environment and the politics that surrounds it.

In public debates about the environment in the United States, we have witnessed, incredulously at times, the political efficacy of skepticism over the role of science, truth, and objectivity on the part of some numerically small but well-financed communities. Combating this is too important in our current lives and must be central to our intellectual inquiries, in particular because media play significant roles in the debates. We are confronting the end of the Enlightenment, not only because democratic liberalism and secularism are under siege but also because of the growing mistrust of the academy, science, and expertise. Our field is not peripheral here, as media are becoming the new epistemology, and one of the affordances of new technologies includes the possibility of broadly sharing counterfactual claims and hiding or masking their origins.
I want to bring to the surface what has been a subtext so far. The reorganization of the field is likely to shuffle the philosophical bases. To disciplines organized around a media technology, from English onward, aesthetics once seemed a natural way of prioritizing inquiry. We became experts on aesthetics, and most scholarship in the twentieth century originated with a text or set of texts. But utter fragmentation of the aesthetic experience means that for the foreseeable future, ethical, moral, and epistemological inquiries must lead the field. In an age in which social interactions are too often mediated, our field is particularly well suited to generate research on social norms and values. At a time in which the intellectual class is under siege, different social factions are sources of popular knowledges that are altering our understandings of life, nature, and technology.

Although I was partly trained in aesthetics by the UT–Austin Department of Philosophy, I am happy about this move away from aesthetics. It reenergizes media studies and brings new possibilities for cross-disciplinary work. It is in this spirit that I favor big questions and substantive themes, and list among the most urgent ones those that help us expand the universe of moral subjects, as well as those that help us understand new ways of knowing the natural world and ourselves. For these inquiries, our field will find new intellectual partners in departments of science and technology, information sciences, environmental sciences, sociology, anthropology, ethnic studies, politics, and law. The mission of understanding how humans are shaped by technologically defined mediation continues, but in exciting new forms and with a renewed social and political urgency.

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Promiscuous Histories, Materialist Theories, Speculative Poetics  
by ELENA GORFINKEL

When I entered graduate school in the late 1990s, my impression of the field of film studies was constituted by a set of tensions and agonistic relations. The university itself seemed a field of contestation, its customs of scholarship and practices of peer review subject to attacks from without and within: the Sokal affair was one prominent flash point, a scandal that purported to be a referendum on the perceived “excesses of postmodernism” in cultural theory but in fact served as a hostile conservative reproach to younger, progressive fields, invested in cultural critique, to stay out of other disciplines’ territory. At the same time, the excitement of new

1 In 1995 New York University physicist Alan Sokal perpetrated a scholarly hoax when he submitted a fake essay written in the “idiom” of postmodern theory to the cultural studies
developments in cultural studies, cultural theory, and critiques rooted in traditions of feminist theory, queer theory, critical race theory, and post- and decolonial histories was palpable. There was the sense that these “new” areas of politicized practice and inquiry disrupted or posed a threat to the old guard of aesthetic analysis, formalism, and close reading, not just in film studies but across the humanities. Just discovering academic life, my low-level disciplinary “aha” moment came in seeing a distinction—between the scholars who had fought for film to be considered an art form, via historical poetics, aesthetic history, or other modes, and the sometimes inchoate interdisciplinarity and prioritization of social relations posed by “cultural studies.” Needing a heuristic, I posed the following questions to scholars I read and to the work of my peers: “Are they interested in film texts, or in people? In what film texts do, or in what people do?” A baldly schematic distinction, no doubt, and one I often asked of myself—at the time, I invariably fell on the side of “people.” A naïve binary, it allowed me to make sense of what the field of film studies was arguing about, against, and for. Does one align with texts, collocated as form, close reading, aesthetics, pattern recognition, the artwork, the film object, cognitive structures, or with people, human subjects, resonant with desire, fantasy, spectatorship, process, labor and its failures, collectivity, the subjective?

It is odd that I drew a line in the sand in that moment, not around an opposition between theory and history—a much-discussed node of debate and contention, then as now—but around a nonhuman and human distinction, a differentiation between object and subject, between form and culture, between a notion of aesthetic autonomy and collective constitution, between the world within the film, made by it, and the world that made the film. Such a preposterous distinction with its obvious flattening and false equivalences seems to me now embarrassingly facile, especially in the presumption that form can ever be quarantined from the labor of its own making or exist outside of politics. Yet however spurious this distinction, it expressed the stakes and hazards of entering a comparably young field, one that contended from its outset with the constant diffusion of screen cultures and moving-image formations beyond its borders. It also reflected a set of anxieties circulating then around the nature of the object of our study and the creeping influence of new knowledge formations and different methodologies. In a state-of-the-field published in these pages in 2004, Jon Lewis, writing on the SCMS at fifty years old, suggested that “losing cinema to cultural studies was inevitable. In the long run (to extinction), taking on such a flexible partner as cultural studies may not, for those of us bound to film in film studies, be such a bad deal.”

The “long run to extinction” may have become rather shorter in this contemporary moment, in which we have edged into global economic, humanitarian, and ecological crises in a new, terrifying, authoritarian political regime.

I came to film studies with an interest in feminist film theory and the cultural politics of the visual, and cinema as a chosen medium was to me frankly an alluring vehicle for
the questions I was most keen on asking: What were sexuality, desire, fantasy? How did
taste operate? What might an aesthetic of transgression look like? (Transgression was
the sought-after contingency and resistance of the 1990s.) The sense of the splintering
or the diversification (whichever way you read it) into so many subfields and the dif-
fraction of moving-image objects and platforms for viewing was not yet in the state of
dispersion we see today, although television had long forced the question. But the ten-
sion between cultural theory and formalism was prominent, as was the historical turn
and the impact of the “post-theory” debates, in which varied forms of empiricism cast
a long, aspersive shadow on the now-suspect Theory with a capital “T.” If the field was
defined through a shared object—celluloid film—and shared conversations as consti-
tuted via different constellations of film theory, we could ask what has happened to the
fate of Theory (and practices of theorizing) in the interim?

Although the object of film and media has expanded radically beyond the
interrogation of such impossible allegiances (e.g., “which side are you on, which media
object are you for?”) to consider very sophisticated modes, methods, and epistemic
frames, we are still left with the sense of an overwhelming, incoherent field, no
longer organized by methods or objects. The field still has the general orientation
and identification of those who “do” theory and those who “do” history, and indeed
job-hiring categories and the way academic positions are allocated still bear this out.
But the field holds complicated constellations of research practices that track not only
the processes and behavior of humans but also nonhuman technologies, networks,
ecologies, and economies.

Cinema and media studies today flouts any pious oppositions of form and culture
and navigates questions of circulation, infrastructure, algorithms, labor cultures, tech-
nologies, and itineraries, in terms of their patterns and social forms, as well as consider-
ing the ontologies, ecologies, and embedded philosophies of cinema and media objects
in relation to the social. Beyond the consideration of the “what” of cinema, its onto-
logical constitution as medium, the field is pursuing the “how” and the “where” of the
moving image and screen practices, focusing on processes, patterns, locations, rather
than manifest content or representation. One arena for such exploration is the thinking
through of questions of cinematic relocation (Francesco Casetti) or diffraction—for
example, in new accounts of film and media circulation, histories and theories of exhi-
bition, and media archaeologies (Charles Acland, Peter Alilunas, Erika Balsom, Lucas
Hilderbrand, Ramon Lobato, Joshua Neves, Jussi Parikka). Another development is
the resting of ontology in other zones of textuality and texture, in film philosophy and
phenomenology, and in accounts of synesthesia and intermediality (Jennifer Barker,
Robin Curtis, Brigitte Peucker, Scott Richmond, Saige Walton, Jennifer Wild).

Form and content have clearly shifted in emphasis, if not also in meaning, as new
formalisms have emerged that consider the deep structures of the image in historical,
economic, and ideological registers. Some of the most powerful recent critiques of
cinema’s place in economies of exploitation and expropriation are grounded in deeply,
inventively formalist modes of reading, for example in Alessandra Raengo’s account
of blackness, visual culture, and ontology, and in Nadia Bozak’s consideration of the
ecological exhaustion that undergirds cinema’s spatial and temporal extensiveness.
While the axis of representation and identity has remained incontrovertibly central
to film and media studies, a countervailing tendency indicates a movement away from the privileging of representation as a field of analysis, akin to the sense articulated in Nigel Thrift’s notion of nonrepresentational theory and emblematic in the ascendance of affect theory, among other developments in the humanities.\textsuperscript{3}

At the bleeding edge of new conjunctions of film studies and theory, politics and ontology are a troubled, if heady, mix, as the seeking of stable ground from which to theorize continually recedes and shifts. One could contend that the seeking of certitude or an essence of film and media in new philosophical inquiries and in the resurgence of ontology comes at least partly as a symptom of a repressed or circumvented problem of politics as the terrain of individual agents, political will, and agency. It also radiates from a rejection of psychoanalysis as one definitive method of understanding the human subject and forms of self and psyche, intention and motivation—a psychoanalytic frame that so organized the “grand theory” tradition of feminist film studies and apparatus theory in the 1970s and 1980s. We have today given ourselves over to the temporality of the network, the algorithm, and unyielding connectivity, which entails desubjectivation in perniciously troubling, if sometimes also seductive, ways.

In contrast to the guiding hold subjectivity had on film theory throughout the 1990s, we can also see a ceding of space to the question of objects, inflected by developments in media theory and histories of specific technologies. Considering the medium as object, the media object as a shifting and mutating form, has been displaced by new processes, practices, and methods but also relocated into what I see as conceptual objects, or allegorical-theoretical tropes—ideas that frame or allegorize, like core samples across very different types of investigation. In this vein, we might think about the varied books and edited collections that have organized many theoretical conversations and recalibrations in the field, ones that circulate around space, time, movement, animation, light, format, platform, scale, and mapping, as well as stillness and slowness (Sean Cubitt, Akira Mizuta Lippit, Mary Ann Doane, Laura Mulvey, Bliss Cua Lim, Song Hwee Lim, Jean Ma, Karen Redrobe, Lisa Parks). The spatial turn led to the temporal turn that has of late led to an infrastructural and ontological re-turn, a flipping of emphasis in which cultural, economic, and technological modes give form and metaphorical valence to abstract apparatuses. Theorizing happens through the material specificity of chosen archives and emerges from the textuality of given film texts and constellations of practices, regional specificities, and global modes of circulation, clearly lessons learned in and through the emergence of new historicism as well as materialist, cultural, and ethnographic approaches to media. There are also new modes of allegorical methodology in which theoretical claims are anchored to concrete texts and objects and made to figure larger developments in moving-image culture (Caetlin Benson-Allott, J. D. Connor). Cinephilia, the amatory relation to film form and film feeling, and cinephile-inflected criticism have also migrated into the film object itself, as videographic criticism inhabits and recasts the film text from within through forms of filmed film criticism, aided by digital technologies and modes of capture (Catherine Grant, Christian Keathley, Adrian Martin).

\textsuperscript{3} Nigel Thrift, \textit{Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect} (New York: Routledge, 2008).
Film studies has always been an interdisciplinary and humanistic field, and the humanities might be where the urgency of film and media studies is both felt most avidly but also dispersed and diffused most thoroughly. The defunding of the humanities at the institutional, state, and federal levels is perennially imminent and has created a consistent state of crisis and a feeling of continued embattlement—seeds partly sown two decades ago in the Sokal and post-theory moment. What is fundamentally at stake in cinema and media studies in the present might be what is also at stake for the humanities as a whole. The challenge for collective identification and shared discourse comes as much from the conditions of our academic labor and the infrastructure of our beleaguered public institutions and of higher education as a public good in the United States, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere. Graduate students and young scholars are under increased pressure, and the shrinking number of tenure-track jobs, the adjunctification of the university, and the ongoing and intensifying assault on the university as a sphere of critique, of noninstrumentalizable knowledge, demands different strategies of collective organizing and imagining.

I suppose that my own tastes for reading, for research and for general affirmation-seeking navigate toward forms of writing that are hybrid, experimental, speculative, adjacent to, or at odds, in one way or another, with a properly disciplinary film studies discourse. In the hyperinstrumentalization of our work at public institutions where accountability, job training, performance metrics, steady outputs, and facilitating workforce readiness are relentless demands, the value of the humanistic approach to scholarship, to reading, and to life clings to immeasurable experiences and activities, ones whose impact cannot be tracked or converted into data. Beautiful, expressive, speculative writing that embraces risky abstraction is often a casualty of such professional logics. It would be facetious to say that our discipline should aspire to poetry. Nevertheless, the poetic, neither a space apart nor a space of respite but rather a domain of habitation and taking time, may provide us with the energy, the light, the diagnostics, and the capacity for doing, being, and living otherwise. So, I am reading Anne Boyer, Rebekah Rutkoff, Nathalie Léger, and Claudia Rankine. Not an alternative space but a space for taking care of alterity.

Cinema studies scholars have long existed in a mode of defending our expertise and policing the borders of our discipline on the lookout for presumptuous nonexperts. In teaching, for example, film is a go-to pedagogical tool used across disciplines that consistently draws student interest. But as many of us have asserted in our institutions, it is also a medium with a complex history, situated in specific industrial and cultural contexts, deeply influenced by the evolutions of technology, and characterized by a rich array of aesthetic conventions. In other words, film isn’t simple. It shouldn’t be casually appropriated by untrained faculty in attempts to engage students or boost enrollments in atrophying majors.

For all our resentment of these practices, though, we must remember that cinema studies was founded by “nonexperts”—as all disciplines must be. The very type of film-centered English classes that some of us dismiss, for example, taught by instructors without formal cinema studies training were once gestation points for the mature discipline we are today. Examining the history of cinema studies, most of our departments, programs, and majors were created and nurtured in “traditional” departments at our institutions—often in the years before their faculty had or could possibly have had a PhD in cinema studies. And even today, we should acknowledge that there may be a lens that language and literature disciplines can apply to the study of film that we “pure” cinema studies scholars cannot—a reason to teach films in these classes, too, that we miss when we enshrine ourselves as the exclusive authorities on this medium.

In considering the questions posed by Lucas Hilderbrand for this In Focus, I begin here with the legacy of the outsider nonexpert because I would like to advocate for the value of the insider nonexpert within cinema and media studies, a field that is widening at a breakneck pace. In this piece, I seek to challenge the enshrined, seemingly innate value of expertise itself, putting it into the context of our current disciplinary moment and exposing what is lost when we doggedly and automatically pursue expertise. As an alternative to its deep-drilling mode, I argue for the timely importance of breadth over depth in an age of rapid technological expansion and the unprecedented convergence of media. My call is timely, I maintain, even when the value of expertise is being crudely and dangerously dismissed on the political stage; I am
firmly opposed to those dismissals and hope to present here a specific and nuanced perspective on cinema and media studies expertise, and one that upholds the value of higher education. The commitment to breadth that I am promoting is particularly essential in our pedagogy, as exemplified by existing models in small liberal arts colleges and in comparative media studies.¹

In the years since SCS added “and Media” to become SCMS in 2002, our discipline has undergone a tremendously fast expansion with few precedents in other fields. Consider how many media forms—not just media texts—have come into popular use during that period, including mobile apps, social media, streaming video, animated GIFs, and contemporary virtual reality platforms.² For a demonstration of our remarkable scope, look no further than the first time slot of the 2017 SCMS conference as a representative sample. In those twenty panels and workshops, presenters spoke about Orson Welles’s use of music, VHS fandom, Google Earth software, festival programming for Arab cinema, 1960s television advertising, Twitch livestreaming of video-game play, climate visualizations, Elvis fan magazines, midcentury Chinese opera films, environmental cinema, Scalar-based analysis of 1950s Cinemascope, sociological filmmaking in the silent era, colonialist impulses in the Pokémon Go mobile game, and media production in Chicago.³ The implications of our field’s increasing range are apparent in the very different kinds of knowledge and skills a scholar would need in order to work on any of these topics. How much expertise would the presenter on Scalar-based analysis of Cinemascope have in common with the presenter on festival programming for Arab cinema? Or the presenter on sociological filmmaking in the silent era with the presenter on Twitch video-game livestreaming? ⁴

There has always been breadth in cinema studies, but I suggest that the gap between these aforementioned topics is much greater than the gap between scholars in the 1970s writing psychoanalytic film theory and those writing auteur criticism. That gap today is also greater—to return to my opening example—than the perceived gap between a scholar of the modern American novel’s expertise within the field of English and her ability to teach a class on Hitchcock. Video games are as distant from film as film is from literature in this example, and yet cinema studies faculty can and should extend themselves to teach the highly influential medium of video games as part of their curriculum. I have heard colleagues at research universities dismiss as dilettantes people like that hypothetical English professor who teaches Hitchcock. But I argue that we need more alleged dilettantes within cinema and media studies—more faculty willing to explore constituent areas of our field beyond their own research agendas and to bring them together in their classes.

¹ I am framing these concerns as pointedly intradisciplinary—urging us all to hold ourselves accountable to the ever-widening scope of our discipline—rather than as interdisciplinary.
² Some of these predate 2002, but all have come into prominence and common use since.
³ Each of these can be found in the official conference program, available at http://c.ymccdn.com/sites/www.cmstudies.org/resource/resmgr/2017_conference/SCMS2017Program_norooms.pdf. My apologies if I have misinterpreted the subject of any of these talks on the basis of their titles.
⁴ These presenters, respectively, are Sam Roggen, Michelle Baroody, Constance Balides, and Alexander Champlin.
Another name for these supposed dilettantes is “small liberal arts college (SLAC) faculty” like me. Cinema and media studies programs at SLACs—where they exist in any freestanding form—generally have one or two (three, if they’re lucky) permanent faculty appointments and a network of affiliates teaching occasional courses that intersect with their subject areas. Even when these programs were just cinema (and not media) studies, imagine the scholarly breadth and dexterity required of a single professor with the mandate to shoulder a school’s entire core cinema studies curriculum.\footnote{This was basically the situation at my own institution, Smith College, as Alexandra Keller ably sustained a film studies program as the only permanent faculty member in the college with a film PhD from 2002 until my hiring in 2016.} Far from staying close to her own expertise in teaching, that professor may personally have been offering courses on silent cinema, the studio era, global cinema, genres, theory, auteurs, cinema programming, and digital cinema. With the necessary (and usually overdue) move to incorporate media studies, the range of forms, eras, industries, technologies, and so on that such SLAC faculties are covering has become even more staggering.

Far from writing a desperate plea for help from your SLAC colleagues, I want to highlight the excitement and intellectual invigoration of working with a mandate like this for breadth in teaching. I’ve been aspiring to become this type of hardworking dilettante for most of my career, ever since my own undergraduate education at Oberlin College. During my graduate studies at UC Berkeley, I entered academia’s more typical culture of tightly focused research agendas and single-topic courses, but I also saw that some of the best scholars in my field were embracing the breadth model—roaming broadly in their intellectual curiosity and not only digging deeply. Linda Williams was a role model for me in this respect (as in most things), as she had managed to contribute oft-taught and -cited scholarship to wide-ranging subfields on gender, race, horror, melodrama, pornography, and documentary. During my years at Berkeley, I watched Linda begin and complete a book-length project in television studies, a wholly unfamiliar field that she immersed herself in late in her career. Her distinguished record demonstrates that the breadth model I’m advocating is not just a liberal arts mind-set, and it is possible in research as well as in teaching.

I myself broadened my intellectual view in those Berkeley years partly as a survival mechanism. Realizing that my expertise in documentary and in gender and sexuality did not align well with the job market, I redirected my attention to broadening rather than deepening my knowledge. I developed—largely on my own, without much curricular infrastructure—an additional specialization in digital media studies.\footnote{Kristen Whissel’s graduate course Cinema and the Digital was a notable exception, and her own move into research on digital cinema made her a strong influence and resource for me.} This became a central component of my dissertation (and now the book \textit{Dying in Full Detail: Mortality and Digital Documentary}) and my most marketable attribute on the job market.\footnote{Jennifer Malkowski, \textit{Dying in Full Detail: Mortality and Digital Documentary} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).} I began with the small corner of digital media studies most relevant to my research, learning about digital video cameras and streaming video platforms used by amateur documentarians. But from there, what had once been strategic became a joyful way of
My claim to working on digital media studies compelled me to hold myself more accountable to the scope of that huge field, expanding first into teaching and then into researching on digital cinema, video games, GIFs, and social media.

There are downsides to working so broadly. Sacrificing a certain degree of depth for breadth means more noticeable gaps in your knowledge and getting things wrong at a greater rate. By occupying so many distinct subfields, I feel the pangs of imposter syndrome more sharply than I probably would with a narrower concentration. And I have to work very hard to acquire at least a minimal depth of knowledge within each of these subfields if I want to teach or write on them. The life of the dilettante is much less relaxed than its reputation! Scholars with a broad research profile also have to develop a clear sense of what makes their work cohere in order to advocate for themselves in getting jobs and promotions. On an institutional level, such research profiles raise questions for tenure: Who is best qualified to review tenure files with broad publishing on film, video games, Internet video, and social media? Will all reviewers be open to the value of work that falls outside their own area of expertise? But the advantages are overwhelming, including the pleasure of connecting with colleagues from across the wide ecosystem of SCMS.

Further, my background in cinema studies and the longer history of visual culture has greatly enriched my new work with digital media, as I am in a position to see clearly the legacies of old media in new ones. This, of course, is the benefit of dilettantism: the cost of dividing our attention laterally buys us a map of multiple subfields’ terrain. We cannot know as much about any one of these subfields as the focused experts, but we can bring them together in ways that the experts in their separate intellectual silos cannot. I bring in the well-worn metaphor of the silo here to acknowledge that there is nothing new about a call for scholars to work more broadly. What’s new, though, in cinema and media studies is the urgency of our need to do so, as our objects of study rapidly multiply and interact with each other to an unprecedented degree in our convergence culture.

While thinking broadly can have major research benefits, I believe its most essential and rewarding role is in the classroom. I’ve described the way SLAC faculty have long embraced teaching broadly through their mandate that each faculty member cover huge areas of the cinema and media studies curriculum. But I’ve come to believe in recent years that we should all be striving for greater breadth within individual classes, not just through a broad offering of single-topic courses. For example, film, television, video games, Internet media, and so on are incredibly intertwined in most of our daily lives and the lives of our students. So how do we justify keeping them consistently apart in distinct courses in most of our curricula? When we allow ourselves to teach this way, we narrow our own thinking about the connections among media and we put the burden of making those connections wholly on our students.

Those of us teaching the introductory course for expanded cinema and media studies departments are no doubt already doing this pedagogical work within at least that one course. We would serve our students well to infuse that mode of teaching more fully throughout our curricula. At Smith College, I am part of a core faculty of two, where I’m working to help transform our former Film Studies program into Film and Media Studies. In navigating that shift, I’m pushing myself to construct
my courses broadly. I structured our redesigned introductory course around a progression of pairings of methods and media: the aesthetics of film, the history of television, the ideologies of video games, and the technology of Internet media. I then show students how to reshuffle that deck, guiding them through projects that explore, say, the history of video games or the ideologies of television. Beyond the introductory level, my course Linking Film and Digital Media is explicitly about cross-media and cross-historical connections. It brings together nineteenth-century visual culture, celluloid cinema, digital cinema, video art, mapping software, and video games to reveal how old media continue to influence new media and how the digital media that cinema collaborates and competes with are reshaping it. My three years in comparative media studies (which provides another useful model) at Miami University pushed me to design courses in this mind-set and to figure out what remains fundamental to media across histories, cultures, and technologies. In that spirit, I designed our introductory Comparative Media Studies course with thematic units providing a selection of answers to the question: Why do human beings create and consume media? Examining the desire to master time, the desire to traverse space, the desire to change minds, and the desire to remediate, my students and I found meaningful connections among media objects from 1840 to today, from Brazil to Japan to Fiji to US Amish communities, and from podcasts to medical imaging to phénakistiscopes to mobile phone apps. We studied what unites rather than what divides our vast field while we still attended daily to medium-specificity and robust contextualization.

To return to the example I began with of the interloping nonexpert, I’m currently building a gaming lab at Smith. Even though I hardly know any other faculty here who are teaching on video games, I can’t wait to be “intruded upon” by nonexperts who want to teach with the lab—that is, curious professors from across disciplines who can get past the technological intimidation of this medium and see its relevance to their own subject matters. I would welcome and support their efforts to learn just enough about games to start bringing them into more classes. And I’m always grateful to meet a fellow dilettante.

Cinema and media studies has grown so vast that none of us sees its whole panorama anymore, if ever we could. That doesn’t excuse us from making the effort of climbing at least a few stories skyward to get a better vantage point. This way of thinking isn’t for everyone. I recognize that some may see it as capitulating to the implicit demand in our current environments—both media and academic environments—to constantly divide our attention or to perform more kinds of labor. But, my goodness, is it ever an exciting time to be reading and teaching and writing broadly. It is a sheer pleasure—and a rare privilege our career affords—to be learning truly new ideas all the time. This feeling of exuberance itself is not new but old. It is reminiscent for me of the sharp intellectual excitement of my own years as a SLAC student at Oberlin (an excitement I see in many of my Smith students today). More broadly, it is reminiscent of the feeling accompanying media themselves in their shiny early years, as Walter Benjamin articulated in the 1930s better than anyone has since: “Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came film
and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling.”

I hope that more of us in cinema and media studies today will feel the pull to “calmly and adventurously go traveling.”


Feminism and the Big Picture: Conversations
by SANGITA GOPAL

When invited to contribute to an In Focus section in which Lucas Hilderbrand asked us to reflect on “the state of the field and whether it has expanded to the point where it is hard to keep track of the ‘big picture’ and take stock of the critical and political stakes of studying media old and new,” I started reading the history of SCMS. A previous In Focus contribution by Jacqueline Stewart struck me as particularly significant, not only for noting how feminist scholars in the late 1970s and 1980s had transformed the study of film by giving it a social and political orientation and had helped to institutionalize it, but also in outlining the rewards and risks of such incorporation—especially for “the minority.” She suggests that “minority” subjects—human and scholarly—continue to occupy liminal spaces in the field, and productively so,” while also emphasizing that “the recruitment and cultivation of scholars of color and scholarship on race must continue to be an organizational and field-wide priority.”

Women, who constitute about a half of the membership of SCMS, are by no means a minority, and feminist perspectives were critical in the formation of media studies. So, in a sense the grand narrative that feminism has done its job both vis-à-vis the field and the institution is valid. However, because that narrative was never really grand but diverse, fractured, and contentious; because it was never only about equity but also about difference; because women-of-color

critique, third-world and transnational feminism, and queer hermeneutics, among other approaches, have always been alert to the entanglements of subjectivity and the capture of bodies by media; because feminism has always been as much about ontology as epistemology, I became interested in how feminist methods might still offer frames for this current expansion of the field. Simply put, can feminism continue to offer us theoretical vantages for analyzing media? What lessons can current scholars and media makers glean from feminist praxis as critique—and vice versa, as expressed by feminisms past? Is the unfinished project of feminism part of the big picture that continues to orient our expanding field in the present and future?

I decided to pose these questions to feminist scholars in the field—those who had helped found and lead the discipline as scholars and institution builders, as well as others who continue to shape what is to me its exciting present. My list was unsystematic and by no means representative or comprehensive, but I was able to speak with about twenty colleagues—mostly via Skype and in a couple of instances via email. I posed to them all some version of the following prompts:

1. What brought you to this field and what does being a feminist scholar of film and media studies mean to you?
2. How do you conceptualize the future of feminism in the expanding world of film and media studies? What important legacies and openings can feminist methodology and praxis offer this future?
3. What work is exciting you right now? What directions are you interested in exploring?
4. What are some challenges for feminist work? What do we need to be vigilant about?

I thank all my respondents for these thrilling conversations and for their patience, guidance, and generosity. What follows is but the crudest summary of these conversations, arranged by theme.

**Feminist Film Studies: Program Building and Pedagogy.** A key insight from these conversations was the intimate links between, on the one hand, a feminist pedagogy that stressed interdisciplinarity, the value of lived experience, critique, and activism, and, on the other hand, the establishment of film and media studies by women scholars. I learned that the institutionalization of film studies, as well as the expansion of SCMS, owes a considerable debt to women’s labor. As Patricia White wryly notes, this of course has meant “a lot of service,” while Lucy Fischer wonders whether it is worth considering a “gender audit,” as it were, by SCMS to take stock of women’s labor in campus departments and in the organization itself. As Patrice Petro notes, there were more women in film studies than other disciplines in the 1980s, and as the biographies of these early feminist film scholars suggest, they were located

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2 The rather tight timeline meant that, owing to the always-stretched schedule of the woman scholar, I was unable to connect with several colleagues despite their generous interest in the project.
across and between disciplines. The task of building the “discipline” of film studies—a discipline “exploited by many but respected by few” fell to them.3

Key feminist scholars helped build film programs by finding nooks and crannies in existing institutional infrastructures and occupying them, inserting themselves into curriculum, building alliances, and gathering resources—a few films here, a projector there, a film festival, a symposium, and/or doing editorial work on collectives such as *Jump Cut*, *Women and Film*, and *Camera Obscura*. Both Fischer and Jane Gaines recalled how they smuggled film into the curriculum while teaching high school, whereas Linda Williams and Vivian Sobchack did so in college composition courses. Julia Lesage remembers that, when trying to start women’s studies at the University of Illinois, she attended a meeting to request that the catalog list in one place all the courses that might count toward a women’s studies major, a male faculty member got up and said, “You are going to teach women to hate men!” Later, at the University of Oregon, she wanted to teach television in the English department but was advised by another feminist TV scholar: “Just say you are going to teach film. They will think even less of us if they know we teach TV.”

The expansion of the purview of film and media studies to include television and later digital media cannot be disarticulated from feminism’s inclusive and expansive pedagogy—as well as its investment in the marginal, the underinvestigated, or, in Sobchack’s memorable phrase, “homey objects.” Constance Penley recounted that her feminist pedagogy turns on telling her students, “If someone tells you there is nothing to see here, that is precisely where you should look.” White tells her students who want to “move beyond” feminism that the feminist commitment to multiplicity occurred in the context of a sustained attention to the structural exclusions of everyday life. The challenge, she says, is to “move from talking about representation as it’s about ‘me’ to talking about what its structures exclude and make visible.” According to Fischer, one of the central tenets of a feminist approach to media is that “no view is neutral.” As Petro emphasizes, debates around feminism, gender, sexuality, race, and—what is very important to her—geopolitics, “created a very expansive dialogue, and I do not want it to be lost.” It is important to recall that feminist media studies, as Petro notes, is not a subfield but a “community of the question” and a “commitment to thinking critically about all our categories.”

**Always Theorize.** All the scholars I spoke with were gravely concerned about the ongoing neoliberal capture and management of diversity that stages all identities as valuable, equivalent, and individualist and that operates as a radical distortion of feminism’s quest for representation and justice. A need to rearticulate objects and sites of scholarly inquiry to epistemic frameworks thus centrally concerned all of them. Such dispersal and multiplicity, as Priya Jaikumar notes, has not prompted an adequate revisioning of theory itself within the discipline, which still seems sequestered from cultural studies and political economy. She wonders how feminism (but not only feminism) might help “infrastructurally create a framework where it is not possible to ask a question if it is absent of a politics” so that one cannot posit that theory and

aesthetics are neutral while other approaches are self-legitimating. Lingzhen Wang likewise suggests that reconnecting with the big picture is critical. She writes, “For feminist media studies, I think the most important first step we need to take is to (re)link the seemingly ‘independent’ or ‘isolated’ subject of our studies (whether in terms of the aesthetic—cinematic form, technological, textual, individual, gender, or regional cultural)—to the ‘big picture’ (the social, political, economic, and geopolitical), to historically situate the former in the latter, and to critically examine the structural/institutional and contingent power relationship between the two.”

Many respondents wondered what the costs of forgetting this lineage of feminist theory might be amid the continuing, necessary, and difficult task of thinking “difference” when equality politics under neoliberalism continues to shore up inequalities through capture, sequestration, violence, and spectacle—even while administering us through the rhetoric of inclusion.⁴ Here women- and queer-of-color critique and transnational feminism’s insistence on the “incommensurable” as a critical component of feminist thought—that we must hold on to alterity even as we struggle for justice and forge alliances—is key. Feminist theory needs to locate itself with fresh vigor in the break between solidarity and difference. In this “schism world” such transversal thinking is critical so that difference and identity may not be equated.⁵ As Jaikumar puts it, as a result of globalization, “[o]ne can no longer describe the demos in national ways. That itself is an argument for why we cannot risk describing [feminism] in any unitary sense.” Rather, she says, we need to always gesture “towards the multiple contexts and belongings.” It is precisely this “acknowledgment of transnational processes as inherently gendered, sexualized, and racialized, and the borders they erect [that] affect different groups differently” that leads Katarzyna Marciniak to observe that “feminism . . . is not a decorative addition or an optional perspective that can be applied to studies of transnational media” but a critical lens for thinking the incommensurable. She continues: “Engagement with difference is tough and risky work, and in order to engage with it productively we must resist the politics of appeasement that tends to gloss over the challenges presented by incommensurability.”

Feminist Method. In the face of the incommensurable, how do we rethink collectivity and praxis? Contingently, divergently, tactically, and reflexively. B. Ruby Rich emphasizes that media making and theory must “exist messily in relation to one another” and that feminist sociality—even in the second-wave model that has been understood as so dogmatic—was always fraught, contentious, and multivalent. Remembering her first antiwar march as a newly arrived New Yorker in Salt Lake City, Sobchack insists on the need to form (temporary) coalitions with those with whom “one has nothing in common” while retaining the right to dis-identify with those with whom one shares an identity. In Lesage’s words, “Revolutions are always

⁴ Kara Keeling has suggested that “in fact, those old critiques of identity are even more important today, precisely because the aims of the ’80s have been recuperated into neoliberal multiculturalism,” such that there is a lot more representation but hardly any attention to the material lives of those being represented; in Huey Copeland et al., “Collective Consciousness: A Roundtable,” Artforum 54, no. 10 (2016): 266–277.

⁵ I take this phrase from Fred Moten, In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
made by people speaking the language of the oppressor.” By way of example, she went on to say that “we have to create a green earth, and we have to begin to do so within capitalism. That is a challenge.” Here feminism’s attention to how normative structures are inhabited in daily life is particularly relevant. Others felt that, while acting collectively, women-of-color feminism’s practice of self-critique and persistent reflection is needed to “air out politics” and question the political itself as a categorical imperative.

Trans theorist Eliza Steinbock averred that the notion of feminism as becoming can be quite useful for disturbing the sex-gender system, yet critical race studies’ investments in liberation struggles rather than identity politics are also necessary. Penley’s emphasis on tactics learned from slash fans who were doing feminist work while repudiating a feminist identity offers another productive and alternative understanding of agency. In Alexandra Juhasz’s contention, “It is not a feminist march because you are fighting for reproductive rights but because you are engaging in a set of practices that feminism has named.”

The ongoing negotiation between knowledge production and activism is a critical core of feminist method. As Stewart noted, she is interested in opening up the history of feminist praxis to activate new kinds of scholarship, first by looking at liberatory formations like the Combahee River Collective to discern feminist doing as feminist method, and then by drawing critical insight from filmmakers. Vicki Callahan believes that new media forms, such as the video essay, are significant precisely in how they allow us to perform critique through praxis; she cites critic-practitioners such as Trinh T. Minh-Ha and Kai M. Green as models of feminist action. Several scholars I spoke with hope that a new generation of students for whom digital media is entirely habitual will use the lessons of feminist praxis toward public scholarship—to, in Rosanna Maule’s words, “activate a critical position from within this immersive media ecology.” They are interested in how feminist media studies and media making might occupy and populate the digital, creating archives of and for the future.

**Feminisms: Futures Past.** To return to Wang, “Feminist cultural studies, film studies included, should also take on another important task, namely, to envision, project, and construct a different ‘big picture’ for the future. This step involves a serious critical reflection on the system we are all situated within,” and the imagining of such a “utopic” future is necessarily accompanied by a return to the past. As Petro notes, this look back to the past to retrieve what could have been is perhaps possible only in what she has called the “aftershock of the new”—that temporal juncture when, as Janet Staiger described it, feminism is the norm and not noticeable as such. Thus, as Kristin Hole puts it, the question of the present or future of the field is linked to how we imagine its past—as teleology or archaeology, through identity or identification. Stewart stresses the need for refusing “closed analysis.” In her words, “Empirical work is important. With regard to black film history, for example, sheer accumulation has an impact.” But progressive work must remain alert to “new openings and new closures since layers of significance accrue over time.”

In the words of Gaines, historical research “can stir things up,” and so “feminist theory needs to meet feminist historiography. What we hope to find, what we do
find, is that which is most explosive in the present.” Referencing a special issue of Feminist Media Histories on comedy, Jennifer Bean suggests that feminist theory as a “performative, focused yet flexible framework” moves across genres, media, geographies, temporalities. For both Bean and Gaines, feminist histories of early cinema are as much about aspiration as about accomplishment, and our present sense of how the cinema suddenly put women all over the world in motion is precisely what gives feminist media studies a utopian futurity and connects it with other methodologies that seek social transformation, including queer and transgender critique, postcolonial studies, and critical race studies.

This history reminds us that there is much work to be done, for the future of feminist media studies is still in transition—unfinished, boundless.

I learned through these rich and diverse conversations that feminist film and media scholars, across generations, welcomed the expansion of the field in new directions so long as we remain committed to constant reflection, self-critique, and dialogue. It is these feminist habits that not only enable us to articulate what we do with the big picture but also bring this big picture into view. Feminism reminds us to always think about frames and stakes with regard to media content and form, as well as its proliferation and diffusion. It is salutary to recall that feminism guided early film and media work not only in generating theoretical and analytical models but also in researching and promoting women’s media and reexamining and assembling archives. This dual emphasis on critique and praxis, theory and history, as well as the political and nonnormative basis of feminist thought, seems more critical than ever as media scholars navigate increasingly complex and entangled media platforms across and between multiple geopolitical environments. If feminism has seemed for a while like ether—there but barely—perhaps it is time for it to matter.

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The Urgency and Affects of Media Studies

by HUNTER HARGRAVES

First, an understatement: the past two years have been emotionally challenging for members of academic communities in the humanities. According to the social media pages of many of my peers within the academy, 2016 and 2017 were full of stressors. Between the United Kingdom’s “Brexit” referendum to leave the European Union, the election of reality television personality Donald Trump to the American presidency, and a number of terrorist attacks from Brussels to Orlando, many from around the world took to Facebook pages and Twitter feeds to vent, rant, mourn, express shock and denial, appropriately call out oppression in multiple forms, speculate on the motivations of white, working-class people, and threaten to move abroad. A common rhetorical strategy was to blame the media for sensationalizing bigotry and for placing ratings above the public interest. Expert lexicographers at Merriam-Webster proclaimed “surreal” (“marked by the intense irrational reality of a dream”) as the dictionary’s 2016 word of the year. The brazen cultivation of an environment in which democratic publics could not cleanly distinguish truth from fiction helped create what Lynne Joyrich has called the “reality televisualization of political formations . . . a meshing of modes of thinking and modes of feeling, which has become the ‘medium’ in which our politics now exist.”

Even media studies scholars who are trained to pause and think critically about patterns across global media flows, it would appear, can succumb to the affects of dread and despair that spread rampantly across networked publics, accelerated by the crisis-like temporality indicative of these media technologies.

As scholars of modern media cultures, we sit in a surreal position in the current changing political and technological landscape. From my own position at an American public university (and one of the largest Hispanic-student-serving institutions in the United States), Trump’s election after a toxic campaign marked by sexism and white nationalism (followed by a presidency of far-right policy proclamations introduced through executive orders, juxtaposed to intelligence


revelations surrounding Russian meddling in the election and influence in the cabinet) has comprised the core of these emotional orbits. Despite my relatively young professional career, the day after the 2016 American election was the toughest day of class I have taught, a sentiment shared by many colleagues regardless of rank or experience. On my own campus, students shared their fears about being deported or having family members deported. One female student broke down in tears, questioning her self-worth and ability to succeed professionally and personally. The affective demands of teaching are heightened through the neoliberal university, in which faculty are expected to manage our students’ emotions while attempting to extract some critical thinking. In Baudrillardian fashion, we all appear to be living in a geopolitical melodrama, although, unlike Douglas Sirk’s films of the 1950s or the prime-time soaps of the 1980s, this story is less glamorous and more disruptive, altering disciplinary and theoretical priorities.

Two media forms emblematic of the contemporary mediaspace come to mind: reality television and social media (namely Twitter). Both of these forms have been blamed for creating the conditions for Trump: their bandwidth as “free” media that engage the “ordinary” subject, their circulation within existing journalistic coverage (tweets and reality TV events becoming news stories), and their cultures of humiliation and competition, despite both having been conceived with democratic aspirations. But what good does it do to acknowledge how reality television acclimates its viewers to neoliberal culture (as many scholars have done), for example, when it has already cannibalized our liberal democratic political discourse?

How can we, as scholars of media, break the patterns of consumption that fit into this cannibalization, when both the rhythms of dread and despair as well as the technologies of escapism appear to be too concretized into our social habits?

While any attempt to respond to such questions requires at least a moderate amount of arrogance, my own interests in this short article focus on questions of urgency and the affective residues of the current political climate as they relate primarily to television studies, my own area of research. I turn to affect and its influence on the study of representation and media form, calling for media studies to embrace the affective urgency of the present by responding with pause. Through examining the affective temporalities that have pushed media studies forward, I argue, we can make sense of a depressive political moment.

If anything, these recent events and our mediated engagements with them have demonstrated the importance of affect in our theory and praxis. Much of our interdisciplinary field has been invested in questions of affect for some time now, so that to claim that media studies, like other fields within the humanities, has experienced an affective turn is somewhat misleading, as different approaches and theoretical underpinnings to the subject have created multiple and competing perspectives. As Eugenie Brinkema cogently argues in her own formalist intervention into affect, to interrogate affect is to insist on its flexibility as a means to an end: the affective turn “has been more operation than curve,” she writes, “and what it has generated

primarily is a series of polemics for its own tropistic gesture, a repeated insistence that the humanities direct new and urgent attention to the previously ignored concept of ______. Not unlike the seemingly unending doom and gloom that pervade the social media posts of the academic left or the persistent flows of televisual broadcasting, work on affect often motivates and is motivated by the conditions of the present; explorations into affect, it would seem, can partially produce the affects they claim to study. This lays the foundations for theorizing media forms as affects themselves, which could be argued to constitute the next iteration of the affective turn (as in Weihong Bao’s notion of cinema as an “affective medium” encompassing multiple media forms as central to the modernization of Republican-era China, in Corey Creekmur’s reclamation of the video essay as a “perfect form” for studying affect, or in Samantha Sheppard’s forthcoming work on the embodied “muscle memories” of black athletes in sport films).  

Even a surface examination of the temporal contours in the subfields of media studies reveals a curious relationship to affect and representation (though, to be sure, these assessments require generalizations). Cinema studies has diverged in its approach, with one vein (film phenomenology) inspired by conceptions of affect divorced from signification in order to revive the medium following its so-called death at the hands of digital technologies (as in Scott Richmond’s work on cinema’s proprioceptive aesthetics that trick spectators into perceiving certain bodily sensations). Another vein has turned back, looking at the period immediately following the medium’s inception to trace the affects of the past as they relate to formal experimentation (as in Maggie Hennefeld’s work on the gendered politics of slapstick comedy in silent cinema). The commingling of affect and representation is also present in the developing field of gaming studies, which in the midst of provocative debates about gender and audience has mined both positive and negative affects of play to produce new readings and spaces for marginalized figures (as in Bonnie Ruberg’s work on “no-fun” gaming experiences as disrupting the dominant—and heteronormative—design of many games). I provide this admittedly brief rundown to illuminate a newer generation of media studies scholars who make forceful arguments concerning questions of embodied representation and affect in both historically specific and speculative ways—though, to be sure, the topography of the affective turn within media studies is more white and American than otherwise.

While television has not experienced the same degree of funeral rites as cinema, the medium’s changing position within Hollywood and convergence culture provides an opportunity for scholars to articulate new political stakes and forms of thinking. By most counts, television appears to be driving the entertainment industry, a result of its cultural legitimation and of technological innovations in distribution that encourage both the speedy consumption of original content and a constant engagement with communities of fans. In an age of “peak TV,” television is also experiencing a wave of “peak TV criticism” (or “socially conscious criticism,” in the words of critic Jaime Weinman): recaps and think pieces disseminated through democratized digital platforms that often diagnose what feels problematic about a text, although as Amanda Ann Klein and Kristen J. Warner have pointed out, such diagnostic criticism carries the unfortunate effect of devaluing the rigor of humanities scholarship. So it may not come as a surprise that some of the more exciting work within television studies combines traditional forms of scholarship with incubatory “real world” engagements, such as Aymar Jean Christian’s “Open TV” project, which not only remaps the pathways of production for web TV but also develops innovative projects from predominantly queer and nonwhite voices, or as in Miranda Banks’s Room at the Top game that interrogates how homophily in the industry occurs along gendered and racial lines, hindering possibilities for collaboration. In many respects, these projects are in line with a television “after TV” that pursues an interactive experience for viewers while targeting smaller audiences aligned by demographics or lifestyle.

While television has undergone enormous change over the past two decades, television studies has in turn evolved without diminishing the role that representation plays in structuring televisual affect: there have been few cognitivist theorizations of television, for example, with the vast majority of scholarship animated by feminist and queer theories of affect. This may be accounted for by television’s privileging of the housewife as its initial ideal audience (thus routing affective codes within a specifically bodied spectator), or by the medium’s early dependency on live transmission as inherently tethering the medium’s affective capacity to signification, what Jane Feuer importantly described as television’s “ontology as ideology.” As a medium historically anchored in the present, television has been invaluable in documenting the representation of everyday experience, even if such representations were filtered through the symbols of a postwar consumer society; in this sense, television can be a useful cultural text to answer Ann Cvetkovich’s important question (following the Public Feelings collective) “How does capitalism feel?” as opening up “something that might be a theory but


could also be a description, an investigation, or a process."\(^1\)\(^2\) It is not inconsequential, for example, that both television studies and affect studies share a common pioneer, the British cultural historian Raymond Williams, who canonically proposed the concepts of flow (to describe television’s temporal rhythm) and structures of feelings (to describe the temporality of lived experience), to highlight the presentness of television and affect, respectively.\(^1\)\(^3\) With technological changes to television that have resulted in a more empowered spectator, the performance of the spectatorial body has become a rich textual site of inquiry for future research, as phrases such as “binge watching” have entered the viewer’s lexicon and as audiences consume programming in progressively compressed states.

Television studies thus has the potential to shape a critical understanding of the affective temporalities that govern the current political and cultural crisis that many in the humanities bemoan. Rather than blaming the stock devices of certain television genres for encroaching on politics, critical spectators should question the role that urgency and speed play in constructing the politics of representation. In this way, many of the hallmark characteristics of the more recent so-called golden age of American television—such as serialized narratives, deeper character investments, shorter seasons, and provocative content—speak to this: when an entire season of a series is made available to viewers on a single day, for example, the viewer may lose the ability to participate in what the first generation of television studies scholars writing on soap opera called “gap filling,” or the ways that viewers speculate, process, and make sense of what they watch day to day or week to week.\(^1\)\(^4\) While this assuredly represents an older model of television programming designed to orient audiences toward consumer society, gap filling unintentionally provided a structural respite from the intensity of melodramatic plot twists and character development, something that could surely be welcome in the surreal political environment of today.

Of course, we do not have the luxury of experiencing the “real world” threats of a right-wing administration at our own pace, with phenomena such as the twenty-four-hour news cycle or the live feeds of social media dictating the terms of political discourse. But as our mediated engagements result in repeated constructed senses of urgency—a temporally embodied state of exception—the appropriate response is to insist on the urgency of media studies instead: a demand of us and others to leaven media consumption with media reflection, to process quickly unfolding events with necessary historical and cultural contexts, and to resist mistaking reactionary observations and opinions for critical thinking.

I came to television studies not from the sybaritic position of what Henry Jenkins calls the “acafan” (even though my formal entrance into the academy coincided with television’s artistic legitimation) but because many of its canonical texts were written by women and because as a commercial medium aimed at a mass audience it has

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always foregrounded issues of representation. But it was Stuart Hall’s masterful lecture “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies” that most directly resonated with my own attachments as an aspiring scholar:

Against the urgency of people dying in the streets [from AIDS], what in God’s name is the point of cultural studies? . . . At that point, I think anybody who is into cultural studies seriously as an intellectual practice, must feel, on their pulse, its ephemerality, its insubstantiality, how little it registers, how little we’ve been able to change anything or get anybody to do anything. . . . [Cultural studies] has to analyze certain things about the constitutive and political nature of representation itself, about its complexities, about the effects of language, about textuality as a site of life and death. Those are the things cultural studies can address.  

While one cannot navigate a discipline through political idealism alone, our current political climate may demand a rereading of Hall’s trenchant defense of cultural studies amid the so-called withering of the humanities within the neoliberal university as well as amid the changes to media forms, consumption practices, and pleasures themselves. Questions of speed and time govern the tension between the work of theory and the politics of daily life, much as the urgency of AIDS gave Hall cause to rethink the productive capacity of cultural studies to intervene outside the ivory tower.

Yet I have outlined here some ways that television studies and other affective critiques of media can disrupt the contemporary calcifying logics of crisis through holistic deconstructions of form and representation. If, as the literature on the many affective turns has pointed out, to interrogate affect is also to produce it, media studies has a responsibility to be distracted by the rhythmically surreal emotions that structure everyday life, if only to be then urgently paused, dissected, and reflected upon, so that we may show future generations why the work that we do matters.

The Sustainability of Film and Media Studies

by Kristen J. Warner

Anxious. Anxiety is the emotion most felt when asked to write about the state of film and media studies. I am anxious because in a moment when everything is viral, words can be so easily taken out of context, and digital platforms are the means by which an entire sector of freelance writers earn a living in this era of gig economies. Wedging the place of film and media studies into public discourse is both necessary and a recipe for bad feelings. Part of my uneasiness exists because I am active on digital platforms such as Twitter, attempting to assert my work and my field into these conversations while trying not to step on too many toes or have my words taken out of context—the worst-case scenarios of both possibilities resulting in unimaginable consequences in my real life. Nevertheless, for all my caution, being on Twitter for me is akin to setting up a digital home on a social media platform and making friends with people in my neighborhood. That is to say, my Twitter encompasses a variety of different neighbors—from other film and media studies academics to industry professionals and critics to television fans. These communities can be wonderful spaces for sharing work, thinking through ideas, and, specific to this essay, illustrating how our research is applicable to film and television news in real time.

One of the rituals I have noticed emerging on the platform is the Twitter thread, aka “rant storm,” in which, rather than completing a whole thought in 140 characters, the user builds the tweets into an argumentative essay. I thought I would try this mode of communication because, if done right, the thread would allow me to talk to multiple communities in multiple registers at one time. So, I wrote threads about my specializations in race and media industry, keying in on specific words and concepts that I imagined the readers on my timeline who were not versed in the literature would be interested in learning. As accessible as this writing mode can be for introducing familiar disciplinary concepts to nonacademic audiences, Twitter threads often prove insufficient because of how little space they afford for the kinds of work, research, and thought processes we pursue as film and media studies scholars, and also because our conclusions are so rarely definite—thus making our ideas harder to circulate as part of the public discourse I mentioned earlier. For example, as much of our work concerns identity, power, structures, and the polysemous nature
of texts, the answers we arrive at are rarely absolute but almost always an ambivalent “both.” I envision this ambivalent positionality on the body as a shrugging of the shoulders that can easily be coined the “media studies shrug.” The shrug exists not because we do not care but because these questions have complex answers that will inevitably have both positive and negative attributes. For us, that complex center space that refuses the poles of either/or is the sweet spot, but ironically, it is what keeps us out of the very conversations in which we should be participating, because what makes for a successful Twitter thread that could be picked up as part of a debate in an online think piece is resolution and a proper denouement that takes only one position.

The media studies shrug thus becomes the antithesis of what defines good online criticism. This makes sense: in an industry of Internet writing where there is never a lack of demand for content, career writers must finesse the art of being nimble workers. They must locate the resources and materials needed to complete their assignments quickly and, simultaneously, need to take pride in the ownership of the ideas they transform into articles so they can circulate the work expeditiously. This ownership includes the very fact that their ideas are singular in nature and original at their core. Because cultural products are made “for everyone,” film and television provoke inexhaustible popular writings based in interest but not specialization and curiosity but not context, so that such popular criticism presents its ideas as though without an origin or genealogy.

This plug-in-a-film-or-television-show-and-play existence does not happen solely in online popular cultural criticism, however. As film and television embody large swaths of the popular, other disciplines annex media content as ways of developing their own approaches and interests. Reality television, for instance, becomes a frame for discussing social science theories and the perceived dangerous correlations between the representations therein and economic policies. Similarly, a text such as Beyoncé’s Lemonade visual album (2016) can be understood only through a signifying callback chain that ties the work to specific disciplinary histories. The content is in play as an explanation of phenomena but not of the phenomenon itself. What if popular critics and scholars from fields outside cinema and media studies understood reality shows not on an isolated case-by-case basis but as part of a system located in the histories of television as a medium? What if they recognized that the medium specificity of Lemonade is not new but is housed within a familiar set of formal practices that—combined with effectively publicized discourse of self-fashioning the artist as an auteur—elides the inevitability of that work?

Here’s my theory: at some point, film and media studies ceded ground to other academic disciplines as well as to the realm of popular criticism. In the case of the former, we yielded our expertise in a quest to remain committed to interdisciplinarity and without being offered—or, quite frankly, asking for—reciprocity. As a result, objects of study that for film and media studies scholars carry specific meanings, historical contexts, and specificities become the catalysts at best and fodder at worst for whatever can fit into someone’s methodological black box. With the latter, we seem to have hardly made ourselves visible. And this is, for me, the current state of the field of film and media studies: an invisible discipline whose skill sets are undervalued and unknown. Perhaps this is because our work is tethered as much to the apparatuses
that manifest cultural products as to the products themselves. We are not special in our complexity. However, we must recognize how rarely our seminal works are cited in mainstream criticism of film and television or even in academic work from other disciplines; what results is underdeveloped analysis or erasure of schools of thought.

But the problem grows even more complicated if we consider that the invisibility of film and media studies stunts its future growth. When I look at my areas of specialization and compare them to the interests of young, future Black scholars like I was once upon a time, I worry that the work that carved out the intersections of critical race theory, representation, film theory, and media industries that I am able to participate in will not be continued in generations after us. I make this point while also acknowledging that Black film and media studies research has long been underrepresented in our field despite making steady strides in the past two decades toward becoming more prominent as Black scholars have wedged themselves into the film and media studies tradition. However, let me be clear: although I worry that our discipline is not legible in general, I am specifically concerned about its invisibility to Black students in ways that would attract them to our programs and train them to be film and media studies scholars practicing in the field. Put simply, if Black cultural critics cite only James Baldwin but not Stuart Hall, Herman Gray, or Jacqueline Bobo—because those references and methods are unknown—have we negated our existence? To be sure, the impact of Twitter and Tumblr in helping to share academic book lists and quotes that help explain contemporary phenomena is significant; however, the names shared, while certainly significant, rarely stem from our tradition and approaches but more generally from communication, African American studies, and literature. I was fortunate to have Beretta E. Smith-Shomade as a mentor during my early graduate work. She kindly directed me to attend SCMS, join the Black Caucus (then called the African/African-American Caucus), and develop relationships through the membership body. Years later as a Black Caucus cochair, I see the generations of scholars who attend year after year, and sadly, precious few young Black graduate students join us—maybe because they do not know our caucus exists but maybe because those students do not exist in our programs in the first place. This is not to say that ultimately scholars cannot find their way to our field’s methods and approaches or be a part of our organization. But I do ask, what incentive have we created that will encourage them to do so? Do we have representative faculty of color in our programs that would attract those students? How have we branded—and, yes, I know that word is discomforting to many of us—our stakes for understanding film, television, and emerging media as structuring forces in ways that make our knowledge creation valuable and essential? The short answer is that we haven’t. But I am not content to let that be the final word.

In the evangelical church tradition there is a song called “Enemy’s Camp” in which the chorus goes, “I went to the enemy’s camp, and I took back what he stole from me.” In the case of what has happened to film and media studies, it’s not so much the ideas and concepts that were snatched but the actual materiality of our existence. What I like about that line of the song is the agency ascribed to the person to go and take her possessions back. At a conference plenary a few years ago I encouraged the audience to similarly “go get your shit back” in the face of the invisibility we fight as members of this field. I realize the difficulty of this task. In 2016, I cowrote a piece in the Chronicle
of Higher Education reminding nonacademic writers on popular culture that, if they decided to delve into deep histories of the film and media studies variety, we specialists in those areas were available to help contextualize and offer citations for reading to enhance and nuance those pieces.\(^1\) We stressed how unnecessary it was for writers to assume that their ideas on topics like race and television or reality television or taste cultures and television were original and new. Indeed, if they would only ask, we would happily direct them to all the existing literature on those topics so that, even if all the literature was not cited in the final draft, writers would still be knowledgeable regarding the subject and not assume they were first. The reactions to our small attempt at getting our shit back were largely positive (as much as I exposed myself to looking around the Internet to locate reactions). But, of course, there were not-so-positive responses stemming from assumptions about haughty, out-of-touch intellectuals who write poorly from inside ivory towers like overdebted Rapunzels—except we have no hair with which to allow those outside to reach us. And while those claims certainly make me as anxious as I was at the start of this essay, we must persist if we want to exist. Does that mean we write for the popular press and find ways to strategically cite our seminal works when footnoting is not an option? Does that mean, then, that we learn how to talk about our work to folks outside the field in ways that illustrates our specific, nuanced knowledge? Does that mean that, as an organization, we create panels of scholars who represent our field at other conferences or events or find institutional support to build workshops designed to introduce potential scholars to our work? Does that mean more Twitter threads? None of these ideas will work in a vacuum. But if we take on an agenda of making ourselves meaningfully visible as a collective and owning our knowledge, we can perhaps gain back the ground we’ve ceded.

I recognize that, as vast as the field of film and media studies is and as divergent as our interests are from one another, the notion of taking collective ownership seems an impossible enterprise. But I think there is commonality in the fatigue and frustration felt when we try to complicate and contextualize ideas to no avail because surface readings are preferred. I organized an SCMS panel stemming from this very frustration given the lack of media studies response to Beyoncé’s Lemonade phenomenon. The joy of the panel emerged from all of the differing approaches to understanding the visual album—from analyzing the live performances and its affective ties to Black audiences, to unpacking the formal patterns that marked the visual album as a music video, to a political economy study that complicated Beyoncé as a businesswoman, to a consideration of invisible collaborative labor regarding the album and film. That panel, for me, represented the best of who we are as film and media studies scholars and offered a holistic view of our composition. The contribution made by the field of film and media studies is great but often unrecognized or squatted on by others who simply do not know we exist. I fight for visibility in the ways I can because I am frankly sick of ceding ground. So, I will give public talks on race and resonance to public relations organizations as well as at universities. And I will happily adapt my writing to a popular style so interested readers can realize that HBO’s current programming slate

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is not innovative because it finally hired a Black female show runner. I want my space back. I hope, for the long-term sustainability of the field, that you do too. * 

Contributors

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