IN FOCUS: New Voices

Introduction

by HOLLIS GRIFFIN, editor

At the 2011 Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) conference in New Orleans, I participated in the workshop “Generations of Media Studies.” Here, several established, senior scholars in the field discussed their career trajectories. They talked about the various shifts in their research interests, watershed moments in their teaching experiences, and what it was like to influence cohort after cohort of graduate students. As the most junior person presenting (by far), my own contribution was pointedly more forward looking than retrospective. I stressed how the political economy of higher education has shifted in a way that makes having a long, storied career—with plenty of support for research and ample energy for teaching—a luxury and privilege that fewer media academics will get to enjoy in the years ahead. As the labor market for media scholars increasingly moves toward contract appointments, and even tenure-track jobs now involve a substantial decrease in the perks long associated with them (e.g., research money, sabbatical time), I emphasized that a career in academia looks a lot different for those of us who are just embarking on the path. My presentation was structured by a certain worry about what lies ahead—not just for the field but also for the academy as a whole. When I blogged about that conference for the SCMS website, I wrote about presenting at this workshop. Because I presented last, and was ultimately asked to participate because I was (am) so junior, I called the experience one of “bringing up the rear with the bad news.”

When Cinema Journal’s editor invited me to put an “In Focus” section together featuring “new voices” in the field of film and media studies, I thought about my role in that workshop as the young naysayer. I worried about personal essays from early-career academics signifying as a chorus of wailing, whining violins. If employment anxiety and professional malaise have always been realities in academic life, it seems that the current scarcity in, and increasing corporatization of, higher education has made these characteristics far more
palpable in recent years. But I needn’t have worried. While the pages ahead feature a considerable amount of apprehension and concern, what I think comes across louder is the enthusiasm this group shares for intellectual pursuits, as well as the joy they feel in being able to study and teach for a living, and the camaraderie they share with friends and mentors in the field.

If the intimate nature of this section is a departure from the writing typically found on these pages, I hope that it is a welcome one. In assembling the list of contributors, my goal was depth and breadth: people from a variety of different subdisciplines, from an array of different institutions. Here you will find essays on film history, new media, television criticism, reception analysis, critical race scholarship, and queer theory. The contributors also embody a diverse cross section of locations: major universities, liberal arts colleges, urban schools, rural institutions, international research institutes, and so on. Another goal I had in putting this section together was to mirror the increasingly global reach of SCMS as an organization. Thus, the essays feature scholars whose teaching, research interests, and current home institutions are located far and wide. As a group, we have also attempted to create some dialogue across the pieces so that the assortment of viewpoints assembled here is united by a tone that is as conversational as it is introspective. Essays of this sort are a risky prospect. Writing them is fraught with all kinds of concerns about authors “saying too much” or “being overly presumptuous.” For this reason, I want to publicly thank the contributors for agreeing to be part of this section. It is to their credit as scholars and writers that the pieces veer away from solipsism and navel-gazing and toward incisiveness and generosity—even as their mode of articulation is personal and affective.

Typically, the kinds of insights shared here circulate informally—thoughts and impressions that bubble up in conversations among peers and, maybe, on blogs and Internet message boards. My hope is that the discourse generated by these essays echoes beyond the pages of Cinema Journal and into Facebook conversations, Twitter exchanges, and posts on various media blogs. It is not often that an academic society provides a space like this one, where some of its “greenest” members can share their feelings and opinions with colleagues. So, please, circulate this widely; the section will be available on the SCMS website. May the conversations started here, not end here.
Identity Crisis

by Racquel Gates

E. B. Du Bois described double consciousness as a sense “of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.”¹

There may be no truer example of Du Bois’s theory than the relationship between African Americans and the media, or between an African American scholar and the field of media studies. Growing up, film and television were sources of entertainment as well as history lessons. My parents would sit me down to watch Gone with the Wind (Victor Fleming, 1939) and were just as likely to praise Hattie McDaniel’s performance as they were to point out the troubling “mammy” trope she played. I suspect that many other media scholars of color grew up with similar experiences of media consumption. On the one hand, I delighted in the images and representations that appeared on the big and small screens. On the other hand, I was never able to separate my enjoyment from an awareness of the ways that these representations operated in broader social and political contexts.

Though I have since learned to appreciate this particular form of media-specific double consciousness, it proved a stumbling block on more than one occasion as I embarked on my graduate school journey. Even though I felt drawn to study mainstream popular culture, I felt a heavy sense of guilt for not choosing to focus on more “respectable” media. I wondered whether I was disappointing people by choosing to study Breakin’ (Joel Silberg, 1984) and rap videos rather than more “worthy” films like Daughters of the Dust (Julie Dash, 1991). Of course, I wasn’t sure who these “people” were that I was so afraid of disappointing. My parents? My grandmother? Melvin Van Peebles dedicated his opus Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song (1971) to “all the Brothers and Sisters who have had enough of the Man.” Maybe I should adopt the same approach?

I was still attempting to reconcile these conflicting impulses when I went to Northwestern University to interview for admission to the PhD program in screen cultures. Interestingly, Du Bois’s double consciousness took on a quite literal meaning when I found myself the only person of color present among the potential graduate students and faculty. I wondered about what meaning my interests would take on in this particular setting. Therefore, when Jeffrey Sconce asked me a fairly simple question—my favorite movie—I felt a knot growing in

my stomach. I was momentarily paralyzed as I found myself in the midst of a personal dilemma. I wanted to be honest and present who I was, but at the same time, I felt a heavy pressure to represent myself as a serious candidate for graduate study. I bit the bullet and tentatively offered that I adored Paul Verhoeven’s *Showgirls* (1995). Having uttered a statement that bordered on confession, I nervously awaited his reaction. When he slipped a copy of *Film Quarterly* across his desk—the issue containing the roundtable discussion of *Showgirls*—I felt like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders.2

For a prospective graduate student who very much felt the burden of representation weighing down on her in that moment, Sconce’s gesture reassured me that there was a place for me in academia. Back in my hotel room that evening, I devoured the reflections on the film offered by scholars Noël Burch, Akira Mizuta Lippit, Chon Noriega, Ara Osterweil, Eric Schaefer, Jeffrey Sconce, and Linda Williams. What impressed me was not simply the novelty of academics writing about a “bad” film, but also that their arguments revealed aspects of the film that I had felt but had not been able to articulate. That moment was revelatory. I had long known that I wanted to focus my attention on bringing out the overlooked merits and possibilities of popular culture, but I did not possess a vision of what that might look like. Jeffrey Sconce and *Film Quarterly* gave me that.

Young scholars need that kind of encouragement. In her essay in this volume, Meheli Sen discusses how she pushes back against Western theoretical frameworks that continually “other” her work on Indian cinema. While my work on African American media does not involve the crossing of international boundaries, it does involve a type of “otherness” based on race. It is particularly important for those either who come from marginalized groups or whose work addresses those groups to feel supported in their research. When you grow up being told in explicit and implicit ways that your perspective on the world is always marginal and subjective, rather than mainstream and objective, you can easily lose your voice amid feelings of self-doubt and the burden to represent yourself in the “right” way.

Certain scholars provided me with this type of guidance throughout my academic career. When I took Suzanna Walters’s course Representations of Gays and Lesbians in Popular Culture as an elective during my senior year of college, I experienced equal parts exhilaration and dread as I realized that I had found what I wanted to do with the rest of my life (I was an international relations major). With only a few months until graduation, I quickly scrambled to put a plan into place that would allow me to switch gears to media studies. I entered a master’s degree program in the humanities at the University of Chicago, and it was there—inspired and encouraged by Ronald Gregg—that I decided that I wanted to pursue my PhD. From there, I went on to Northwestern.

I was fortunate to receive that kind of encouragement from a range of academics who chose to invest in my professional and personal development as a scholar. At Northwestern University, Jacqueline Stewart not only advised my dissertation but also bolstered my spirit by constantly assuring me that my work mattered. Jeffrey Sconce and Lynn Spigel first encouraged me to find my voice and then helped me refine my

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critical-thinking skills. I met Tulane’s Beretta Smith-Shomade at my very first SCMS (I still have my conference badge), and since then, she has provided an unending source of professional advice and personal advocacy.

Even with the strongest support system, however, there are still some obstacles that loom large on the horizon for rising academics. It is no secret that the current state of the job market is easily the biggest challenge facing young scholars right now. The pressure to land a tenure-track job places financial, emotional, and psychological burdens on graduate students, and potentially influences the scholarship that they undertake. With the pool of qualified (and often overqualified) applicants growing at a rate disproportionate to the number of available tenure-track jobs, budding academics are forced to think about their research in increasingly strategic ways.

Admittedly, I entered graduate school rather ignorant of the larger context of the academic job market. Had I known, I might have never made the decision to apply in the first place. Or I might have chosen research topics that seemed more likely to land me a job after graduate school. Because I was blissfully unaware of just how bad things really were, I had no such concerns when I began my PhD. I explored media texts that I found interesting or provocative, and I pursued those research questions that had personal significance to me. Had I known better, I would have designed my seminar papers, conference presentations, publications—my entire academic identity—around those areas that departments were most interested in developing.

Because I was oblivious to these issues, I pursued research projects that resonated with me on both the personal and the professional levels. I wrote my dissertation on African American representations of whiteness in popular culture, focusing on white-face texts such as the film White Chicks (Keenan Ivory Wayans, 2005) as well as broader discourses of “selling out” in black-cast film and television. I argued that the notion of “acting white” was a frequently changing concept that shifted across time, genre, and medium. In his essay within this section, “Lassoing the Unicorn,” Hollis Griffin explains his desire to find a way to explore the enjoyment that people derive from media texts while still acknowledging the problematic nature of those texts’ production. Like Griffin, I felt a similar dissatisfaction with scholarship that focused primarily on the problems associated with black media texts rather than the pleasures. Furthermore, I wanted to identify subversive elements in the texts themselves rather than just in the process of reception.

As with Griffin’s experience, a specific book responded to my internal dilemma. Alexander Doty’s Making Things Perfectly Queer had a profound impact on me and continues to shape how I think about the politics of popular culture.3 The reverence with which Doty treated figures like my childhood hero Pee-wee Herman validated my growing perspective on popular media. If Doty could convincingly tease out the radical potential of his texts, perhaps I could do the same with black media texts that had been denigrated in the past. I had already been mulling this over tentatively in my mind, but it wasn’t until I read Doty’s book that I allowed myself to fully embrace it.

As I progressed through graduate school, I would encounter many other scholars whose work had a similarly influential effect on me. Christine Acham’s *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power* was one example. Her thoughtful treatment of the relationship between black popular television in the 1960s and 1970s and social discourses of race and identity provided me with an example of the kind of book that I envisioned myself writing someday. In her introduction, Acham acknowledges the problematic images of the television shows about which she writes but then boldly states that the pleasure that she and other African Americans took (and continue to take) in viewing them cannot be so easily dismissed. While Acham was speaking of her personal experience with these television shows, she could have just as easily been addressing my ongoing internal conflict regarding the politics of the films and television shows that I loved.

Donald Bogle’s *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, Herman Gray’s *Watching Race*, and Ed Guerrero’s *Framing Blackness* are books that I’m sure that most racial representation scholars would cite as having an early influence on their work, and I am no exception. As foundational texts for scholarship on race and media, these books provided me with a solid framework for thinking through issues of identity and representation. The scope of Bogle’s *Toms*, the rigor of Gray’s *Watching Race*, and the thoughtfulness of Guerrero’s *Framing Blackness* still fill me with a sense of reverence and keep the bar high for racial representation scholarship.

If some books validated ideas that were just beginning to take form in my brain, others blew my mind altogether. Richard Dyer’s *White* was one of those. By the time I encountered it in my third year of graduate school, I was much more adept at reading scholarship critically. For example, the reverence that I felt for Herman Gray’s *Watching Race* was still there, but I no longer treated his arguments as gospel. With Dyer’s *White*, however, I simply nodded my head in agreement as I read the book from cover to cover. His discussion of whiteness—both its social function and its representation in popular culture—not only was razor sharp in its observations but also was written in such clear and plain language that his points seemed more like common sense than academic arguments. Dyer’s approach in that book showed me that even complicated ideas could be spoken plainly and truthfully.

Fortunately, my commitment to this particular research agenda ended with a tenure-track job. I worry, however, that the nature of the job market actively discourages certain types of scholarship and certain research topics while encouraging that which is current and trendy. Emerging scholars need to contribute to the expansion of the field, and that cannot happen when they are too busy turning themselves into the types of scholars that they believe the field wants, as opposed to the types of scholars that they actually want to be. I benefited tremendously from the freedom to go off on intellectual tangents when I was a graduate student, testing the waters with topics that

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I eventually decided against pursuing, but doing so strengthened my critical thinking and widened my perspective. I worry that as jobs become scarcer and the competition for those jobs rises to a fever pitch, graduate students may feel that they cannot afford that kind of flexibility.

Put another way, I fear that the current state of the job market will tip the scale in favor of what is marketable as opposed to what is meaningful. I was tremendously affected by Alexander Doty’s scholarship because I could tell that his work meant something to him—something beyond what might sell books or look impressive on a CV—and in those moments when I allow myself to daydream about my professional future, I find motivation in the notion that someday, a student might be inspired by my work, just as I have been inspired by the work of others. My academic interests developed in connection with the discourses of the field, but they were born out of my own lived experiences as an African American viewer. And though I once worried that my identity would further marginalize me within the academy, I now recognize that the perspective that I bring to my research is valuable precisely because it is mine and, therefore, different from the perspectives of my colleagues.

That is why I am particularly encouraged by the ways that other scholars are bringing their own unique perspectives into the field and prompting new and exciting developments. Specifically, I am thrilled to see pedagogy that is aimed at bridging the gulf that exists between popular media and the scholarship that examines it. Max Dawson’s Northwestern course The Tribe Has Spoken: Surviving TV’s New Reality is noteworthy because it thoroughly incorporates contemporary television into the classroom. In addition to using the reality television program Survivor (CBS, 2000–) as the primary object of study, Dawson mirrors aspects of the show in the course by dividing students into teams, hiding immunity idols around campus, and inviting Survivor cast members to serve as guest speakers. As the field widens and more scholars tackle subjects like reality television, celebrity, and new media, Dawson’s innovative course suggests new possibilities for the ways in which our scholarship and pedagogy engage with their objects.

The boundaries of the field are expanding beyond the walls of the academy, providing young scholars with new forums for exchanging ideas. Academic blogs like Flow, Antenna, and In Media Res not only provide access to audiences outside the walls of academia but also allow scholars to address significant media events in real time, thus avoiding the delay that inevitably comes with academic publishing. While I value the process of academic publishing because of the high standard that it creates for scholarship, I am often frustrated by the lag time between an event’s occurrence and scholarly analysis. I have had some of the most interesting discussions about popular culture on Facebook with both academics and nonacademics. One of these occurred in the wake of Mitt Romney’s speech at the NAACP convention, and I was thankful when Antenna gave me the opportunity to organize my thoughts into a cohesive form on its blog. That kind of active engagement is the type of work that I think can, and should, fill the space created by the slow turnaround of academic publishing. Furthermore, in a field long characterized by innovation, blogs such as Anne Helen Petersen’s Celebrity Gossip, Academic Style and Kristen Warner’s Dear Black Woman productively blur the line between academic and popular writing.
Now out of graduate school and entering my second year as an assistant professor at CUNY’s College of Staten Island, I keep these scholars’ work in mind (along with the work of many others) as sources of inspiration as I attempt to offer my own contribution to the field. I still struggle from time to time with the competing impulses that I first experienced as a child watching old movies with my parents. In addition, I now bear the responsibility of recognizing those internal conflicts in my students and providing them with the same support and validation that I have benefited from at various points. Whether this self-consciousness stems from race, gender, sexual identity, or class, I see it in my students’ hesitancy to offer opinions and in their attempts to give the “correct” responses that they feel will properly represent them in front of both their classmates and their instructor. Recently, I screened *Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915) for my Film History class. The experience felt monumental. I immediately flashed back to two of my own viewings: first with my parents, and then as a graduate student. As I looked around the class while the students absorbed the images, I immediately recognized the emotions that I saw reflected on their faces: fascination, discomfort, curiosity, and anger. These were the same emotions that I felt when I first watched *Birth of a Nation* with my parents and that I continue to feel every time I view the film. At an earlier point in my career, I would have tried to separate my feelings about the film into two seemingly irreconcilable and separate categories: my African American self versus my scholarly self. Now, however, I see those two identities as mutually constituting. Whereas I would once have viewed those tensions as an impediment, I now see them as an opportunity for reflection and a call to action.

Likewise, I wonder if we might find some productive value in exploring the tensions that currently exist in our field. While, on the one hand, scholars continue to produce groundbreaking work and technology revolutionizes how we engage with one another as colleagues, those developments are countered by the worsening state of the academic job market and the uphill battle faced by the humanities as a whole. Though I am nervous about the consequences of these issues, I am also hopeful that the current tensions will somehow eventually lead to a process of reformation that leaves the field stronger than before.

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Researching Online Fandom

by LUCY BENNETT

My first ventures into academia began while studying for an undergraduate degree in journalism, film, and broadcasting at Cardiff University. Though I initially wanted to be a music journalist, it was during working for this degree that I realized that academic writing ignited a stronger passion within me. Rather than write about music in the journalistic sense, I decided to pursue my studies in the area of fandom with a specific focus on the Internet. It was through my exposure to Matt Hills’s and Will Brooker’s work at the time that I began to understand how I could conduct valid and exciting research that interrogated and explored the fields of fandom and cyber studies.

Thus, my main areas of research and study have evolved to encompass an intersection of audiences and the Internet—how the Internet is used, how power is negotiated, and the ways in which social media affects communications. Within this field, I am most fascinated by fan cultures and fandom, and my work mainly looks at popular music fan networks and communities. My PhD, completed in November 2009 (also at Cardiff University), was a cyber-ethnography, focused on Murmurs.com, an online community of the American rock band R.E.M. Under the supervision of Matt Hills, I explored how normative behavior within the community was encouraged and maintained. In doing so, I examined the importance of, and power relations surrounding, oppositional fan identities and the manner with which fans negotiate community norms.

As a fan, community member, and part of the administrative team that helped run the community, I was in a unique and challenging position to undertake this research and provide original insight into the maintenance of fan communal norms. In this sense, I had a personal investment in my object of analysis, as Hollis Griffin has also experienced and outlined in his essay in this section. While conducting the ethnography, the scholars that inspired me most were Will Brooker, Henry Jenkins, Matt Hills, Daniel Cavicchi, Nancy Baym, and Cornel Sandvoss. Brooker’s work continues to remain an important source of inspiration: I later built on his chapter on *Lost* fans in particular in my
own post-PhD study of *Lost* online fandom and its approaches to temporal play within the narrative.¹

At the same time, reading Henry Jenkins’s influential *Textual Poachers* allowed me to understand and consider further how fan cultures often produce rich and powerful methods of reading, adapting, and approaching the fan texts.² Jenkins’s application of de Certeau’s “strategy” and “tactics” to fandom also proved revelatory in my initial foray into fan studies. In my PhD dissertation, I sought, then, to discover how normative behavior could be maintained and encouraged in an online fan community—in other words, how the accepted or “right” ways of fan conduct and the expectations and conventions of a fan community were communicated to members. Alongside Jenkins’s work, I drew on Mary Douglas’s theory of “matter out of place” and Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopic spaces to demonstrate how fan communities can approach nonnormative behavior (or, conducting themselves in the “wrong” way) through the use of bounded space and discourses of order and rationality.³

Matt Hills’s *Fan Cultures* also became a key text for me, especially in terms of understanding my liminal position as scholar-fan and researcher, which often pulled me in two directions. Hills’s cautionary advice—that “asking” participants, most specifically fans, is fraught with the danger of their “auto legitimizing their responses”—contributed significantly to my ethnographic approach.⁴ Being aware of this proposition that simply “asking” participants is insufficient in itself to deliver comprehensive knowledge integral to the ethnography, I strived to maintain a balance between “asking” the fan participants and highlighting the “gaps and dislocations” within their responses and community discourse—an approach that has continued to shape my current work.

Daniel Cavicchi’s work on Bruce Springsteen fans was also extremely influential. In particular, his descriptions of fans attending live Springsteen concerts and the ways in which fandom is a distinction process that fans continually adjust and monitor worked to shape and inform my understandings of fan behavior.⁵ Nancy Baym’s work on fan cultural norms has also been an important guide in my approach to fandom. Her observations in her study of the soap opera fan community “r.a.t.s.” acknowledge the possibility and importance for communities to discuss an array of subjects in addition to, or in place of, the object of fandom, and these provide a rich contribution to fan studies.⁶ For the community in Baym’s study, a specific focus on discussion of soap operas alone had a negative impact. She discovered that a focus on discussing the object of fandom alone was not enough to maintain and generate a sense of community among members. Inspired by Baym, I explored the R.E.M. fan community’s

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approach to non-R.E.M.-related subjects and concluded that the community often operated under an assumed commonality in which a prime interest in the band was taken for granted and did not always need to be reinforced.

Cornel Sandvoss’s arguments about processes of self-reflection in fandom were a further influence on my PhD work. In *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption*, Sandvoss suggests that the fan object is deeply interwoven with our sense of self and who we would like to be, thus positing a model of fandom based on self-reflection between the fan and object of fandom. Practices of self-reflection are evident in the way in which fans superimpose these beliefs onto the object of fandom. However, this process, he argues, is based on narcissism—a procedure of misrecognition—whereby the appeal of the object of fandom is based on the projection of our own image. In this sense, the fan text works rather like a mirror through which the fan’s recognition and meanings of readings are molded. I built on these observations when examining a subgroup within the community named the Droolers, who focused on the physical attributes of the R.E.M. band members and were thus deemed nonnormative. Sandvoss’s insightful work prompted me to show how these Murmurs community members were seemingly performing and projecting parallels between themselves and the object of fandom. These scholars were particularly influential and thought provoking for my early work as a fan and cyber studies scholar.

**Understanding Social Media Platforms.** Since completing my PhD, my work has mainly focused on social media and the ways that audiences or fans are using these tools. My first venture into this area was to explore how American recording artist Lady Gaga engaged with her followers through social media and encouraged some fans to realize the power they could hold and the changes they could make as citizens. With more than twenty-six million followers on Twitter, a fan following on Facebook of more than fifty-two million, and a strong fan base on YouTube, Lady Gaga is a timely exponent of how social media can be employed as a tool by modern celebrities to mobilize their fan bases. First, she has used the platforms in a range of philanthropic and activist efforts (from attempts to repeal the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy to fundraising for homeless shelters) that often work to address her fans as fellow partners in these activities and subsequently inspire many of them to engage in further initiatives, with some making their first connections with politicians and first ventures into civic action. Conducting an online survey—posting invitations to participate on LadyGaga.com (official) and Gaga Daily (unofficial)—I received 156 responses (from twenty-six different countries), which provided revealing insights into how some Lady Gaga fans viewed their engagement with these activities. To understand these connections, I argued that social media is currently reconfiguring celebrity activism, whereby what David Beer identifies as a “perception of proximity” offered by social media to fans can be used by celebrities to instigate connection and direct action.8

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Developing from this work, I began to explore how objects of fandom communicate with their fans on Twitter, a medium that potentially allows a direct connection between both parties. Building on work by Marwick and boyd, and examining celebrity practice on social media, I sought to understand how these connections were affecting fans’ cultures, continuing my explorations of Lady Gaga. I examined how fans viewed their positioning and communications with the star through Twitter and argued that the process was working to reconfigure levels of connection and depths of engagement between both celebrities and their associated fan communities. I discovered that Lady Gaga uses Twitter to combine the public and private elements of her personality, as well as to communicate directly to her fans as fellow partners, and they are positioned as making vital contributions to her work. This practice seemed to encourage, for some fans, strong feelings of inclusion and value, despite their placement as one among potentially millions of followers. I intend to explore this behavior further in other fan cultures in an attempt to understand how social media tools such as Twitter are influencing celebrity and fan relations and the expectations, power struggles, and performances that may occur. Nancy Baym’s current work on independent musicians and their use of social media to communicate with fans is also proving very valuable to my work in this area.

Another element of my work has focused on how these platforms have changed live music engagement for fans and audience members. With the arrival of mobile Internet and texting, fans are able to tweet concert set lists and other information as it happens, allowing nonattendees around the world to feel that they are part of the live event. I conducted a study examining how fans of the prolific touring artists U2 and Tori Amos undertake this practice with assigned concert attendees tweeting and texting the set list to online fans, who have gathered to enjoy the show together, as it happens, in front of their computers. Building on Auslander’s concept of liveness, I argue that some fans are employing social and mobile media in an effort to reshape and contest the boundaries of live music concerts and our understanding of presence at these events. I show that online fans can become connected to the concert and subsequently experience some form of replication of the event, which has strong meaning and significance in a fan community. My next project will explore the ways that social media affects physical attendees at the shows, suggesting that it may disrupt Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of flow and Durkheim’s idea of the “collective effervescence” of a live concert audience.

In addition to this work on social media and fandom, I have also been exploring the use of social media among broader audience groups. I analyzed tweets surrounding a Channel 4 televised live debate concerning the 2011 England riots to demonstrate that audiences were sharing views and information on Twitter, in synchronization with the

broadcast. The tweets I analyzed by viewers and program hosts and producers suggested that power relations between television networks and online audiences are also being contested and renegotiated through Twitter, as viewers are able to immediately question and challenge program makers during the broadcast. I concluded that this practice has a significant impact on viewership, powerfully affecting the ways in which audience and programs engage with each other.

Overall, my current and future work will seek to unravel how fans, objects of fandom, and audiences in general are approaching social media tools and how, subsequently, our understandings of what constitutes a fan, viewer, or audience member may be recontested as more individuals use the platforms to communicate and connect with others.

Fan Studies Network. Another important element of my work is the creation of the Fan Studies Network (http://fanstudies.wordpress.com). In March 2012 I cofounded this group with Tom Phillips from the University of East Anglia in an effort to unite and foster connections internationally among scholars in the field. Fan studies is a rich and thriving area; however, we felt that there was no one place where we could reach other scholars in the area and discuss relevant news and topics. Our main goal was also to have a network where individuals in all stages of academic careers could come together with all positioned as equal and important as each other, regardless of seniority. Thus, professors could speak alongside undergraduates and master’s students alongside PhD students, all interacting and sharing information and news. To launch the network, we created a blog page where calls for papers, reviews, and book and conference announcements are posted. This was supplemented by a Twitter news feed and mailing list, where discussion has flourished—scholars have been introducing themselves and their work with great enthusiasm. As Racquel Gates points out elsewhere in this section, social media have become invaluable in allowing scholars, especially those in the early stages of their careers, to connect.

To assist the network, we then assembled a board of members who could offer their support and input: Bethan Jones, Richard McCulloch, and Rebecca Williams. As of August 2012, the network has gained more than 350 members worldwide. We are producing our first special issue for Participations: International Journal of Audience Research, consisting solely of new work from members of the network. We deliberately encouraged authors to connect via the mailing list and find other scholars with similar interests to cowrite articles, and we will be including forum debates between scholars on particular issues about fan studies. In total, the special issue will feature contributions from authors spanning eight different countries.

The encouraging level of interest and enthusiasm toward the Fan Studies Network illustrates the dynamic and internationally vibrant current state of the fan studies field. Although it has been explored and studied from many different angles and considerations through the years, the influence of the Internet and, most specifically, social media on fandom is resulting in a younger generation of scholars evaluating the new challenges that these platforms present and questioning how we can understand their impact. In the future, the Fan Studies Network plans to expand and develop a conference while continuing to encourage scholars from an international
geographical spread to join and make connections, delivering even more vibrancy to the fan studies field.

**Where I Am Today.** At present, my motto with my academic work is to keep busy and inspired—something that I have successfully achieved, especially over the past two years. During this time, I have discovered the true value of conferences, which have introduced me to so many fantastic people and ideas. I am currently leading a module and supervising dissertations in digital cultures and new media at Cardiff Metropolitan University, as well as acting as a research associate at Cardiff University, and I am editorial assistant for the journal *Social Semiotics*.

However, I want to end with the most important consideration of all. When reflecting on my work, how it has developed, and where I am currently, the thing that stands out the most, and significantly more than the theoretical models and books I have outlined through this piece, is how much I have cherished having people that believe in me and my work. Academia at times can be difficult and lonely, but having people that support you and see the strength in what you do, can be incredibly valuable. In addition to Will Brooker, who set alight the initial spark and continues to lend support, and my parents (who have endlessly listened to my conference presentation rehearsals and done much, much more), Inaki Garcia Blanco at Cardiff University has been an incredible and important inspiration, helping me to see what I could do and believing strongly in my work. David Machin has also given me great opportunities and provided very valued support. These are the people that have helped me immensely as I have made my way from the early days of my undergraduate degree and whose support will continue to echo throughout my next and future steps within academia.

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**Transitional Eras**

by **Laura Horak**

Fridays afternoon—the worst part of the week. Identical Dell monitors sit on gray desks around me, each cluttered with photos and Post-its. By the end of the day, several of the desks will be clean and smooth, with no traces of their former occupants. Friday was firing day.

The year was 2004. The place? Google headquarters, Mountain View, California. After six months in San Francisco volunteering for independent filmmakers, chauffeuring a real estate agent, and editing video at a high-energy physics lab, I needed a real job with a real salary if I was going to make rent. An acquaintance posted on Friendster: Google is hiring. After completing several tests, an impromptu writing assignment, a phone interview, and three in-person interviews, I got
the job—as a temp. The pay was decent; the snacks were amazing. The downside: no health insurance, no paid sick leave, and no job security. I soon discovered that the company’s vaunted “Don’t be evil” motto did not apply to temps. Our job was to service the small-time buyers and sellers of online advertising as quickly as possible, without making any mistakes. All of us had to keep getting faster and more accurate every week, or else on Friday we were out.

If we managed to make it through the weekly firings for twelve months, Google had to hire or fire us (due to a 2000 lawsuit won by Microsoft “permatemps”). The chances of getting hired full-time were about 50 percent. For the few who made it, the joy of finally being able to go to all the parties and ski trips washed away the bad taste of the previous twelve months, which was called “drinking the Kool-Aid.”

Although I eventually got hired full-time, I never drank the Kool-Aid. While Google is undoubtedly a thrilling intellectual playground for engineers, for temps it is just another incarnation of the preunion Fordist factory. I learned recently that my old job was outsourced to workers in Hyderabad a year after I left, and it has since been automated.

I left Google in 2005 to begin a PhD in film and media studies at the University of California, Berkeley. From working with the newest of new media, I turned my sights to old media, or, more precisely, to the period when the now-old medium of film was new. I had already stumbled into film history as an undergraduate at Yale. Though I entered college as a physics major, I switched midway through to a double major in film studies and women’s and gender studies. At first, like many students interested in film, I wanted to be a director. I spent a semester at film school in Prague. But during senior year I got my first taste of archival research. Jonathan Ned Katz, author of The Invention of Heterosexuality, led a small seminar in which we researched the deviant gender and sexual practices of Yale students past.1 We read old diaries, letters, and yearbooks. It was amazing.

That same year I stumbled across a website that listed movies with transgender content, Jaye Kaye’s Transgender Movie Guide. (Sadly, the site was taken down in 2010.) To my surprise, there were thousands of examples, even back to the first years of film. Many of them weren’t available on VHS or DVD, so one of my advisers, Charlie Musser, encouraged me to go to the Library of Congress. Sitting in a dark room, threading 35mm reels onto a Steenbeck, I watched previously unimagined worlds unfold in front of me. It was there that I got hooked on film history.

**Intellectual Genealogy.** What I try to do is theoretically informed film and cultural history. This consists of a curious, rigorous, and open-minded exploration of the way media, entertainment, and visual culture functions in particular times and places. I investigate the ways mass-produced media and popular entertainment shape modern cultures and, in particular, how they produce and transform genders, sexualities, and conceptions of nation and race. For example, my dissertation, “Girls Will Be Boys: Cross-Dressed Women and the Legitimation of American Silent Cinema,” analyzes the way early filmmakers drew on the diverse meanings of cross-dressed women to

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attract cross-class and transregional audiences to the cinema. Likewise, my new project, the manuscript “Cinema’s Oscar Wilde: Mauritz Stiller and the Production of Modern Sexuality,” traces the circulation of new forms of sexual discourse across media, disciplines, and nations via the films and star persona of the queer, Jewish, Finnish-Swedish filmmaker Mauritz Stiller.

My work is deeply informed by the queer and poststructuralist insights of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, who pointed out that the things we take to be expressions of our innermost self—our sexual and gender identities—are in fact part of larger social systems that interpellate subjects in certain ways. These identities are therefore contingent, vulnerable, and historically variable.

From the field of history I draw the compulsion to track down diverse, wide-ranging objects, from forgotten film fragments to old Sears catalogs. To understand the material and discursive conditions of a particular film’s production, distribution, and reception, I go to histories of, for example, public health, theater, childhood, fashion, technology, and international trade relations. For inspiration, I look to George Chauncey’s *Gay New York*, Thomas Laqueur’s *Making Sex*, Laura Doan’s *Fashioning Sapphism*, and Sharon Marcus’s *Between Women* for the kind of rigorous, creative historical scholarship that I hope to achieve. In film history, I have been galvanized by work like Miriam Hansen’s *Babel and Babylon*, Jackie Stewart’s *Migrating to the Movies*, Shelley Stamp’s *Movie-Struck Girls*, and Rob King’s *Fun Factory*, as well as by the scholarship and pedagogy of my mentors at Berkeley, such as Mark Sandberg, Kristen Whissel, Linda Williams, and Tony Kaes. While I share the poststructural skepticism toward historical positivism, I still believe that historical objects have the power to surprise, to push back against present-day assumptions, and to offer new ways of thinking. Although my work is not limited to “recovery,” I do believe that recovering forgotten sexual, social, and aesthetic histories is an important, and a political, task.

Griffith and Gates discuss the importance of queer film studies to their own scholarship elsewhere in this section, and queer approaches have also been foundational for me. The works that most inspire me combine textual and cultural analysis, such as Chris Straayer’s *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies*, Patricia White’s *Uninvited*, Siobhan Somerville’s *Queering the Color Line*, Ruby Rich’s *Chick Flicks*, and Richard Dyer’s *Now You See It*.

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3 Laura Horak, “Cinema’s Oscar Wilde: Mauritz Stiller and the Production of Modern Sexuality” (unpublished manuscript), Microsoft Word file.
More popular works by cinephiles like Vito Russo and William Mann also spurred my early interest and point to the wider community for whom queer and cinema history are vitally important.\(^7\)

The thing I love about both queer and silent film is the connections in these fields among scholars, archivists, distributors, programmers, fans, and (in the case of queer film) makers. Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, Il Cinema Ritrovato, and the San Francisco Silent Film Festival create important spaces for people working with silent film to form friendships and mentorships, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender film festivals like Frameline and Outfest likewise play an important community-building role. Recently, the Queer Caucus at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies started a mentorship program pairing early and midcareer scholars, creating invaluable links across generations and a sense of belonging for those entering the profession. Mentorship from senior scholars, as Gates writes in her contribution, is particularly crucial for young scholars from underrepresented groups and for scholars whose work addresses those groups.

**Transitional Eras, Then and Now.** The period between 1908 and 1917 has been named American cinema’s first “transitional era,” when the medium changed from display-based, artisanally produced attractions to a narrative-focused industrial system. It was full of experiment, innovation, and imagination, as well as crisis, bankruptcy, and foreclosed possibilities. Many feared—or celebrated—the fact that consumer capitalism and technology were moving faster than law or public understanding. In other words, these were years very much like our own.

Today we are living in the midst of another transitional era in moving-image media, but also in higher education and print culture. As we know, celluloid film is disappearing, and “cinema” as a social experience of sitting together in a public, darkened hall is becoming less common. At the same time, other kinds of moving images have insinuated themselves into our lives more thoroughly than ever before. The exponential growth of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies demonstrates the vitality of the discipline, but also its splintering. This may not be a bad thing. What we lose in shared vocabulary and methodology, we gain in insight into diverse moving-image practices, using tools honed in many other disciplines, alongside the literature, history, and critical theory tools that first launched film studies.

The shifts occurring in higher education are as important as the shifts in moving-image media. As in the wider global economy, full-time, permanent positions are being replaced en masse with poorly paid temporary jobs. According to the Coalition on the Academic Workforce, more than 75 percent of the instructors at US universities, colleges, and community colleges are contingent workers—adjuncts, lecturers, and graduate students. In 2010, more than six times as many people graduated with

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a PhD than tenure-track positions were advertised, according to the *Economist*. As Gates and Griffin point out in their essays in this section, universities are increasingly overwhelmed by a capitalist market mentality—that they should be run like corporations and produce graduates who will fit into the corporate economy. Perhaps most damaging is the debt that students take on to complete a degree. In the United States, the amount of college loan debt just surpassed credit card debt, totaling more than $1 trillion. To paraphrase Sarah Kendzior, a recent anthropology doctorate, higher education used to be a way out of poverty, not a way into it. The phenomenon is not limited to the United States. England in particular has sharply cut education funding, and undergraduates have witnessed a threefold increase in tuition fees over the past couple of years.

The publishing industry, too, is in a time of crisis. Most relevant for new doctors is the fact that academic presses are now expected to earn their keep. This limits the kinds of risks that publishers can take with first-time authors and with work on topics outside the mainstream. Most colleges and universities still require a book—a real, printed-on-paper, peer-reviewed book from an academic press—for tenure to be granted. And yet these are precisely the kind of books that are hardest for a press to take on. I am all for pushing scholars to do work that speaks to people outside their specialty—which an emphasis on salability might do—but not at the expense of banishing unpopular topics. Furthermore, while publishers want books that can draw wide audiences, young scholars are told to hold off on writing for a popular audience until they get tenure. The expectations of tenure committees and the realities of publishing seem to be at odds here, and young scholars are caught in the cross fire.

While paper books are undeniably in decline, electronic journals are proliferating like mad. On one side are open-access journals that promise a new era of freely circulating scholarship—but that are overwhelming in their multitude. Many young scholars feel they cannot afford to publish in these places until they have proved their ability to publish in the top paper journals. On the other side are closed-access journals that require increasingly lofty subscription fees, which cordons off their content from all but the wealthiest institutions. In fact, even the wealthiest institutions can’t afford them.


Although the digital era has upended the publishing industry, it has generated wholly new opportunities for historical research. The mass digitization and optical text recognition of books, the periodical press, sheet music, scrapbooks, and photographs, as well as legal, medical, and business archives, fundamentally changes the kinds of questions that can be asked and who can do the asking. Most exciting are open-access projects, like the Media History Digital Library, Archive.org, and the Library of Congress’s American Memory project. ProQuest, NewspaperArchive.com, and Ancestry.com also allow hundreds of thousands of periodicals to be searched, for a (sometimes steep) subscription fee. (The precarious availability of works scanned by for-profit corporations is worrying, but, for me, some access is better than none.) Overlooked moving-image media—old television shows, actualities, newsreels, commercials, instructional films, and home movies—are also increasingly available, on websites like EUscreen, the Colonial Film Project, Filmarkivet.se, and Archive.org. Of course, there are important limitations to mass digitization—text recognition is still fairly rudimentary, copyright regulations prevent open access to much print and image media, and digitization takes place unevenly around the globe. Nonetheless, the histories we thought we knew will be transformed when we can search so much newly accessible material in new ways and when scholars from around the world can access this material without leaving home.

The View from Sweden. With the exception of a semester at film school in Prague, all my academic training has occurred in the United States. Coming to Sweden to do postdoctoral research has been both unsettling and enlightening. It made me realize that many of the things I took for granted about how the academy works are actually fairly specific to the United States. A few things I think the American academy could learn from Sweden are the following:

• Swedish academics talk to the public—a lot. The newspapers and radios are full of interviews with researchers, PhD students send out press releases for their dissertation defense, and many academics write regular opinion columns for mainstream news organizations. The public orientation of Swedish academic life is evident at every level.

• There is greater transparency in hiring. For example, the top five candidates for a position receive written evaluations from the search committee explaining the candidate’s strengths and weaknesses and the reasons for the committee’s final decision.

• Reading lists draw from scholarship produced not only in Scandinavia and the United States but also across Europe and the United Kingdom. (Admittedly, scholarship produced in Asia, Africa, and South America is underrepresented.) Not until coming to Sweden did I realize how provincial US reading lists tend to be. Though I was assigned a smattering of mostly dead European and Soviet thinkers in film theory classes, I was largely insulated from recent scholarship coming from scholars residing outside the United States. For a long time, scholarship has flowed out of the United States, but
not into it. While I may have been particularly insulated because I was researching US film history, there is a lot of good research being done on the United States elsewhere, as well as theoretical and historiographic interventions that could be applied to any topic.

As Neves and Meheli point out in this issue, scholars in Asia are increasingly circulating their work among one another and developing methodologies and models that provincialize hegemonic Western theories. But it is up to US-based scholars to even out the flow of scholarship so that we begin taking in as much as we put out. One small but simple step is for US instructors, just as they try not to fill their syllabi with dead white men, to likewise include new work produced by scholars in other countries. It is also important that graduate students continue to learn several languages and that they be encouraged to spend time at academic institutions outside the United States. Additionally, more time, money, and recognition should go into translating work into and out of English, as the Permanent Seminar on the Histories of Film Theories (affiliated with the series Film Theory in Media History, published by Amsterdam University Press) has begun to do.

There are also things that the US academy does particularly well that might be transferred to Swedish (and perhaps other European) universities:

• There is rigorous and constant training in analytical writing, particularly on how to make and defend an argument. This was emphasized at every phase of my education to a much greater extent than I have seen in Sweden.

• From what I’ve seen, the relationships between professors and graduate students are less hierarchical in US institutions than in Sweden and elsewhere in Europe.

• Finally, as much as it can be personally unsettling, the informal rule that scholars should change schools between undergraduate and graduate studies, and again for their first job, helps stir the intellectual pot in a productive way. In smaller countries like Sweden, which have only a handful of film and media departments, the tradition has been for individuals to stay at the same institution almost their entire lives. This has been changing in recent years, but it will take a long time for departments to truly diversify.

Overall, the differences I’ve encountered between Sweden and the United States suggest that there is much that institutions in different countries can learn from one another. Encouraging scholars to spend time working outside the country of their academic training has the potential to improve the quality of research, teaching, and life across the board.

What Next? Living in the midst of a transitional era means that new kinds of research, collaboration, and creative expression are possible. But there are many casualties of the rapid-fire changes, particularly as the rules (e.g., of tenure, of copyright) lag behind the conditions. As a postdoctoral researcher with only a year of funding left, I can’t say that I am a whole lot less anxious than I was on a Friday at Google.
Lassoing the Unicorn
by Hollis Griffin

When I decided to go back to graduate school, my family thought I was insane. Leave my publishing career in New York? Amass tens of thousands of dollars in student debt? End up living God knows where? They tried, rather desperately, to talk me out of it. Alas, the proverbial bug had already bitten me. I was working as a publicist at Routledge when I started taking home academic monographs for “pleasure reading.” My next job, at Grove Press, provided fewer opportunities for working on serious nonfiction. So I started freelancing for academic publishers. I would read the books I had been assigned and could not help but think, “I want to do this.”

In many ways, I have always wanted to do “this”—to think about, write on, and teach classes related to media culture. Admittedly, there are parts of academic life that I wish were different. For instance, I know way too many smart, capable people looking for stable, full-time academic employment. I am also writing this in a new apartment (my fourth in four years), which is about ten hours by car from my family, whom I miss terribly. But despite these things, I feel most deeply alive when plowing through a dense book or leading a class discussion on “the tough stuff”—how film, television, and the Internet relate to cultural politics and questions of identity, my central areas of interest as a teacher and scholar. If getting to do this for a living means an uncertain future and some distance from loved ones, then that is a bargain I am willing to make.

I have had my doubts, though. Friends and colleagues had long promised me that the academic job market could try the mettle of even the most dedicated scholar. They were right. I was offered a tenure-track job in my third year on the market. I tell people that it felt like lassoing a unicorn. I regret that this has become the metaphor I resort to in describing the experience of getting (potentially) permanent employment, but it speaks to the metrics of the current academic job market. Demand outweighs supply to such a large extent that opportunities for stable, full-time positions seem as rare as mythical beasts. Putting together dossier materials, mailing them off, and waiting with bated breath for replies from search committees were such wildly fretful experiences that I have come to realize that one never conquers job market angst. At best, I think people just try not to think about it. I use the metaphor of lassoing because the anxiety is something I have been attempting to tame, rope in, and seal off.
think about it only when I absolutely must. In moments of duress, I try to focus on what made me go back to school in the first place. This often involves flipping through my favorite books so that I can remember what, exactly, inspires me.

Lauren Berlant’s The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship is at the very top of this particular list. In its methodological reliance on close reading and deep commitment to mining the fraught connections among sexuality, media culture, and politics, I see it as a good model for my own work. Her unpacking of the relationship between minority status and the public sphere, as well as her relation of media practices to questions of national belonging, are central to the things I am interested in as a scholar. When I teach it—and I try to wedge it into as many classes as I can—I point students to one sentence in particular. It is so sharp and invigorating that it reminds me just how necessary media criticism is. At the start of chapter 2, Berlant writes: “[I] foreground here the centrality, to any public-sphere politics of sexuality, of coming to terms with the conjunction of making love and making law, of fucking and talking, of acts and identities, of cameras and police, and of pleasure in the text and patriarchal privilege, insofar as in these couplings can be found fantasies of citizenship and longings for freedom made in the name of national culture.” This sentence makes mining the politics of film and television feel as revolutionary as riding on a tank. In the days of my job market ennui, I read it over and over. It reminds me why the work I do is vital. It also reminds me why I love doing it.

If my affection for The Queen of America Goes to Washington City demonstrates my interests in media, sexuality, and citizenship, my fondness for Anna McCarthy’s book Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space reveals my attraction to media historiography and questions of space and place. It is another book that I flip through frequently. I am drawn to the wealth of archival evidence that McCarthy uses to describe the many public contexts in which we find television sets. When I was putting together my dissertation project, I wanted to describe the public reception of media forms in gay and lesbian bars to contextualize the development of a consumer market for sexual-minority audiences among the media industries. As Joshua Neves points out in his piece here, Ambient Television helps one think through the complexities and contradictions of media and public space, providing a nuanced, thoroughly supported guide to the manifold ways that screens shape and inform people’s circulation through commercial venues.

The attention I pay to space and place dovetails with a keen interest in questions of representation. Two books, in particular, have been particularly formative: Tara McPherson’s Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South and Victoria Johnson’s Heartland TV: Prime Time Television and the Struggle for US Identity. Both use cultural geography as a means to interrogate issues of national identity.

2 Ibid.
criticizes the “lenticular logic” by which images of the South freeze out racial diversity and hinge on glorified images of conventional femininity. Johnson thinks through how images of the Midwest paint ideas of a “symbolic homeland” for US citizens, where the heartland is at once championed and fetishized but also dismissed as being backward and “square.” Like *Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, both books rely on close readings of film and television texts to make their arguments, a methodological approach that remains at the center of my own work.

It is difficult to convey how influential work by Alex Doty and Ron Becker has been on my scholarship. Doty’s *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* was my first exposure to queer media research, and to say that it “changed my life” is as corny as it is accurate. As Racquel Gates points out in her essay in this section, Doty’s playfully deconstructive essays provide a whole new lens for interacting with media culture—and underscore that criticizing a text does not mean that you cannot love it. At the same time, Becker’s *Gay TV & Straight America* pays close attention to the tension between consumerism and citizenship in queer representations—the ways that representations of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people often traffic in these intertwined discourses at the same time. Becker’s discursive analysis of that very tension has offered still another model for my research.

While Doty emphasizes the reception of queer media and Becker looks at questions of production and distribution, I have always wanted to do both. At one point, midway through my doctoral program at Northwestern, I got frustrated with doing this kind of work. I was drawing too hard a distinction between issues of political economy, on the one hand, and questions of reception, on the other hand. I had a strong interest in the ways that media industries courted queer consumers, but I was reticent to throw the baby out with the bath water and dismiss this as merely more evidence of post-Fordist niche marketing. Don’t people find moments of strength and identification in these representations even if they are, sometimes, banal and/or conservative? At the same time, I was wary of isolating particular texts as being more progressive than others. Is it really up to me, as a critic, to make such fine distinctions? Is there even a way to do this systematically, as opposed to resorting to my whim and fancy?

This is when I discovered work on affect and emotion. Reading Amy Villarejo’s *Lesbian Rule: Cultural Criticism and the Value of Desire* was nothing short of a watershed moment for me. In it, she discusses the ways that queer media workers often self-identify as consumers, subverting the exploitative logic of capital by way of labor rooted in affect. Villarejo considers the imbrication of capital and emotion in circuits of queer cultural production to highlight how commerce circulates feelings of inclusion and belonging to queer media consumers. These affects are often delimited by questions of ideology—as when appeals to audiences rely on raced, androcentric logics that preclude identification among diverse queer publics. But in detailing how emotion circulates through the processes of use and exchange, Villarejo offers a new vocabulary for understanding the


ways that cultural products are created for and distributed to queer audiences. I apply her method of critique to different circuits of cultural production to consider the vexed courtship of queer consumers in the media marketplace—the ways that the feelings attending cultural citizenship are made available and circulated for sale.

I see affect and emotion as underlining the tension between consumerism and citizenship characteristic of all minority media. Insofar as I am a scholar who is more interested in questions than objects, I am typically drawn to research that crosses media platforms and intellectual traditions. I can date this back to the experience of writing my master’s thesis at the University of Texas. I worked with Janet Staiger, Michael Kackman, and Mary Celeste Kearney on a thesis that examined how detective narratives were used to court queer consumers across different contexts: film, television, and literature. When I proposed a project that looked at merely one context, Staiger encouraged me to think more broadly. In the time since, I have become accustomed to thinking across modes of production, distribution, and reception. I remain grateful for her advice.

My book project combines an analysis of free newspapers, direct-to-DVD cinema, multiplatform cable, network television, and mobile-media apps to consider how queer media consumers are courted in the context of digital media convergence. I use the free newsmagazines to historicize developments in the queer media marketplace, identifying flows of capital in urban centers that I then use to describe different circuits of queer cultural production. The project started out as a bunch of random texts and practices that I thought were interesting, but I was not sure how they all “fit” together. My dissertation advisor at Northwestern, Mimi White, was patient and supportive as I figured it all out. I am especially grateful to Nick Davis, who read every word of the project several times over. He also supplied tissues for crying (yes, I cried—don’t judge) and caffeine for energy. Everybody should have a Nick Davis.

Among my friends and colleagues at Northwestern, I developed a reputation for “getting worked up” about my research. I think because my dissertation came from such a personal place—I was ostensibly trying to apply a critical lens to the conflicted feelings I experienced as a consumer of queer media—it was difficult for me to wall off my investment in the project. But if I am being honest, I have long had an acutely, sometimes overly personal stake in my scholarship. One of my best friends from graduate school once told me that he was terrified of me when we first met. He told me that it was disconcerting to take classes with someone who takes theory so seriously and personally. My answer to him: “I don’t know any other way to be.”

As I make my way through the rocky terrain of publishing and advancement in the academy, my personal investment in questions of politics as they relate to media and culture has not always come across as solicitously as I have intended. Last year, I wrote an article for the online journal Flow that was eviscerated in the comments section. I was aiming for a pensive meditation on the ways in which media scholarship is influenced by structural changes in the academy related to research funding and publishing requirements. Despite my best intentions, it came off as an angry screed against particular research questions. I wrote it from a place of anxiety and concern about the shrinking job market, rising expectations placed on faculty, and an influx of corporate-style thinking in higher education contexts.
In the time since, I have decided that I made an altogether too-common mistake in the Internet age: I published something online without vetting it enough first. As the political economies of academia and publishing morph and shift, the peer-review process is very much up in the air as scholars increasingly take to blogs and online journals to circulate their research. These forums make for timely publication because they do not require the same editing and revision processes of more traditional publishing venues. It is up to scholars to do that ahead of time. Academics frequently complain about the length of time required for peer review and the harsh words enabled by the anonymity of the process. In general, I am sympathetic to these concerns. Yet my experience publishing in Flow demonstrates some of the benefits of peer review: it provides a structure for giving and receiving feedback. I cannot help but think that my tone would have come across better had some reviewers looked at my piece first. As a junior scholar who may, over the course of his career, witness the demise of traditional academic publishing and a significant revamping of the tenure process, I worry about some of the unintended side effects of these developments. Insofar as peer review formalizes the processes of editing and revision, it enables rethinking and reconceptualizing. As such, I think that there are some benefits to peer review that should be kept on the table during debates about the future of academia and publishing.

Of course, peer review is but one aspect of academic life in flux at the moment. The increasing corporatization of the academy curtails the number of tenure lines in favor of contract employment and urges researchers to find external funding for projects. Such developments make underpaid adjunct labor and underfunded humanities scholarship a reality on many campuses. Lassoing the unicorn has become an infinitely trickier proposition than it used to be. I hope to turn this into a new research trajectory, one that will help illuminate the political questions attending economic precariousness in the contemporary moment. I am thinking through a new project related to emotion and neoliberalism that would use media analysis to interrogate what it feels like to live in the contemporary United States, with its increasing emphasis on privatization and deregulation. It seems that the impulse to network, a cornerstone of professional life in the information era, is in direct tension with neoliberalism’s mandate for entrepreneurial self-management. As companies increasingly outsource labor to maintain profit margins and nation-states dismantle the apparatuses of social welfare to cut costs, the neoliberal subject is formed via crisis. People are expected to connect with others even as they are increasingly required to operate alone. I see this crisis in subjectivity as being affective; people are made anxious by the contingencies of living in a globalizing world where prevailing governmental philosophies and corporate practices mandate that they navigate the marketplace on their own. This affective crisis is made manifest in academia with the sharp increase in the number of adjuncts and contract appointments, as well as the debates about the demise of tenure. But it is also borne out in an assortment of film, television, and online media: from melodramas about people losing their homes to reality television shows in which entrepreneurs compete with one another for jobs, to guidebooks for social media networks that coach people in how to “brand” themselves. Where these interests take me remains to be seen, but I see them as the continuation of a research focus on the lived, felt dimensions of cultural politics that is heavily influenced by personal experience.
At the SCMS conference, anxieties related to navigating the shifting landscape of academic employment and publishing make for troubling parlor talk. I know way too many people—intelligent, dynamic people—who are looking to “lasso the unicorn” themselves. When talking about their searches for permanent or even full-time academic jobs with friends, some attendees laugh it off; others get misty-eyed and wistful. Attending the conference—as enjoyable and invigorating as it can be—has an undercurrent of sadness and trepidation these days. My hope is that SCMS, as an organization, finds some way to intervene in this scenario. I am not sure what that would look like, exactly, but there has to be a way for a burgeoning academic society to rally on behalf of its members.

At a point in time when opportunities for academic employment are as rare as they are fleeting and unstable, the organization would do well to imagine a new kind of mission. How can the Society for Cinema and Media Studies help its younger members navigate uncertain futures in both affective and material ways? The organizational structure, conference meeting, and website redesign provide avenues for much-needed mentorship and social connections. But has the time come for SCMS to initiate fund-raising so that it might provide one or two or (hopefully) more research fellowships for newly minted doctorates? What would it look like for an academic society to work within the flows of capital enabled by businesses and corporations yet still remain critical of the politics endemic to such a practice? I close with these questions because it seems that while the current crisis in academic employment is dire enough, even tougher times lie ahead. I hope that the conference, website, and pages of Cinema Journal continue to be places where tough questions are asked and even better answers are offered.
New Specificities
by JOSHUA NEVES

How would I characterize this present moment? From the perspective I inhabit it seems to reflect a shift from a phase of intensely analytical activity we went through during the late 1970s and the 1980s, when we gathered a wide assortment of tools of analysis to a moment in which new cultural objects are actually being produced.1

—Irit Rogoff

Early in his intimate study of photography, Camera Lucida, Roland Barthes asks, “Why mightn’t there be, somehow, a new science for each object?”2 The provocation is part of his own personal inquiry—both investigation and eulogy to his late mother. He wants to understand the general (photography) through the particular (a few pictures) and to reroute canonical approaches by taking as his starting point the images that matter “for me.” The slender book is a good example of Barthes’s adeptness at combining critical and expressive registers. It foregrounds both his and our subjective impulses—this picture—and the ways he and we live with audiovisual technologies (even after what they signify passes on). Barthes’s desire for a certain specificity—“a new science for each object”—is durably iconoclastic precisely because it at once insists upon and refuses any singular understanding of a medium like photography. Rather, it is a call for a new mode of interdisciplinarity defined not by ever-more sciences “surrounding” an object of study but by the construction of a new object of knowledge.3

Barthes’s aspiration moves me to consider how what we might think of as new specificities are integral to contemporary film, TV, and digital media studies. Paradoxically, the need to account for a greater range of media texts, sites, and practices across diverse cultural and geographic contexts is at once a way of zooming in and zooming out. Being specific means capturing precise details—then, there, that—but is also bound up with the creation of new species, categories, and knowledges. Indeed, specificity and scale have a checkered past.

Scholars like Doreen Massey have critiqued the widespread tendency to treat the “local” or “micro” as concrete and empirical while taking the “global” or “macro” as abstract or theoretical. As Massey writes, “Those who conflate the local with the concrete . . . are confusing geographical scale with processes of abstraction in thought.” New specificities are not simply about spatial, material, and global twists in the humanities and social sciences; rather, they are at the very center of our understandings of critical and cultural theory, and of doing media studies. In what follows, I pursue some of the specificities that matter to my own work, with a particular focus on overlapping of issues of intermediality, (in)formality, and globality.

**Inter-Media.** Let’s begin with the following assertion: medium specificity is both too specific and not specific enough. We return to this claim in a moment, but first a brief detour. I want to start by connecting our current moment of transition to an earlier theoretical debate—screen theory and audience studies in late 1970s and 1980s. Variations of screen theory, of course, draw on poststructuralism and psychoanalysis, emphasizing problems related to narrative, apparatus, and ideology—to borrow the title from Philip Rosen’s seminal collection of 1970s film theory. To take just one example, Rosen writes that engagements with the apparatus ask, “Are there subject effects specific to cinema, to the kind of machine it is, to the kind of viewing situation it generally involves?” Disparate screen theories supply powerful models for understanding how subjects are constituted or “hailed” through their encounters with media texts, technologies, and the thicker social and cultural process to which they are imbricated, including processes of misrecognition that so plagued political thought following the global crises known as May 1968.

Among the challenges to 1970s film theory—and it was primarily about film—is that the insistence on abstract spectators, or the “subject-in-the-text,” disappears or stagnates “real” spectator-subjects. To activate actual viewers, scholars working across cultural studies in the 1980s began to focus on how audiences, fans, and youth culture make sense of texts through reception, use, and style. Such work is not (and to my mind, should not be) a categorical attack on understandings of suture, interpellation, and the apparatus—though, of course, there were many harsh dismissals—but a way to complicate understandings of subjectivity and to underscore the dialogic relationship between social texts and social subjects; too many people’s desires, both popular and marginal, simply cannot be mapped onto Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”

Books like Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* and David Morley’s *The “Nationwide” Audience* thus suggested new modes of empirically grounded research, as well as new models for thinking about relationships between text and/or screen and subject.

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It has been well rehearsed that studies like Morley’s engagement with viewers of the British TV program *Nationwide* help us to see that textual meanings are not limited to the texts themselves and that spectators, too, are active producers of meaning. Perhaps most recognized via Stuart Hall’s “Encoding/Decoding” and the later work of scholars like Constance Penley and Henry Jenkins, new fields of audience and fan studies pursued spectators who actively remade dominant cultural meanings and images (e.g., Penley’s discussions of “slash”). While these insights counter certain excesses in what we are loosely calling screen theory, the growing reliance on empirical, spatial, and ethnographic frames also requires continued interrogation. This is a legitimate worry for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that our universities and fields increasingly promote a certain instrumentality that values and rewards quantifiable research, and that marginalizes (cuts back, combines, closes) critical and interpretive programs. In short, what are we to make of the “ethnographic turn”—now some decades old—in media and cultural studies?

Ien Ang offers a useful appraisal of the turn to ethnographic research in her 1996 study *Living Room Wars*. In particular, she critiques the uncritical and depoliticizing convergence between what are distinct research traditions. We can refer to them as scientific and critical traditions, though of course these terms and fields are more complex. “What is at stake,” she argues “is a politics of interpretation.” Simply put, scientific or positivist researchers dismiss the act of interpretation as bias. They actively seek methods—and methods are central—that eliminate the “whims” of the researcher, working instead to locate “objective social reality.” What we are calling critical approaches, in contrast, foreground such biases. They deny the existence of a neutral observer, objective methods, or slivers of reality and insist upon the incompleteness of knowledge. Ang thus inserts herself into the conversation about interdisciplinarity by distinguishing the value of an “interpretive ethnography”—a mode seeking not scientific truths but new specificities to construct interpretations and theories: “to arrive at a more historicized and contextualized insight into the ways in which ‘audience activity’ is articulated within and by a complex set of social, political, economic and cultural forces.”

In this context, I want to make a case for the continued usefulness of critical media ethnography, widely conceived, and its relationship with inter- or transmedia studies. One such example that coincided with the start of my PhD was the research group Object of Media Studies, which convened at the University of California Humanities Research Institute in fall 2005 and later published digitally in the *Vectors* journal. Participating scholars investigated everyday things like movie ticket stubs, powder compacts, condoms, videocassettes, and antenna trees. Their questioning of the objects and objectives of media studies also returns us to Barthes’s ambition of a new science for each object. As Amelie Hastie explains in her curator’s statement, “[t]he object—a thing, at first glance, that might seem motionless—allows us to halt the fleeting time, the

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10 Ibid., 35.
ephemeral nature, of the moving image and other transitory media in order to dwell on histories, theories, and disciplinary boundaries.”¹¹ The Object of Media Studies group insinuates a broader swell that is interested in how critical textuality can be put in dialogue with everyday stuff, practices, and settings.

This triangulation is a productive way to make sense of observational models over the past decade. If the first wave of audience research sought to expand certain trajectories in the screen-spectator relation, more recent media ethnographic studies explore what Anna McCarthy, in her 2001 study Ambient Television, refers to as the “relationship among subject, screen, and space.”¹² This vantage incorporates not only the vital role of the object (in this case the TV console) but also spatial practice (the protocols of placing, control, watching, decorating, and the like). Of particular importance is the notion of site-specificity, which McCarthy borrows from installation art to describe how the “audiovisual and material forms of TV blend with the social conventions and power structures of its locale.”¹³ Her approach opens up common understandings of where media take place (e.g., outside the home or theater), as well as of the broader media fields or ecologies that shape our experience—TVs, of course, are not alone.

McCarthy’s work joins variegated ethnographic, spatial, and archaeological shifts in media studies. In terms of my own academic development, I point to the innovative work of scholars like Lisa Parks and my classmates and cofounders of the Media Fields Journal at University of California, Santa Barbara, as well as approaches or studies developed by Arjun Appadurai, Lynn Spigel, Siegfried Zielinski, Ravi Sundaram, Koichi Iwabuchi, Wanning Sun, Geert Lovink, Lila Abu-Lughod, Irit Rogoff, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Chua Beng Huat, Elizabeth Povinelli, and Nishant Shah, among many others. Echoing back to Rogoff’s epigraph, the point I want to make here is this: critical materialist research is well suited to the current moment because it can help us to attend to significant changes in the textures of our media landscape and the ubiquity of old and “new cultural objects.” Put otherwise, the problem of medium specificity is one that quite literally surrounds us. The concept is too specific in that it carves out particular media (e.g., film, TV) or modes of production (e.g., art cinema, Hollywood), disconnecting them from the broader media fields we inhabit. However, medium specificity is not specific enough when its abstractions become out of sync with both the material and imaginary problems facing our cultures.

**Informality.** The aim of foregrounding new specificities is not to produce new fields or to replace the old, but to generate new sets of relationships and enable fresh perspectives. In this section, I do this by focusing on two senses of informality: (1) informal media economies and (2) informal publics. Work on informal economies in fields like anthropology, sociology, and urban studies has made significant the role of invisible, irregular, shadow, parallel, or secondary networks—for example, studies of

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¹³ Ibid., 2.
unemployment and squatting—demonstrating their centrality to social, political, and economic life. Likewise, informal media economies pursue unofficial, unmeasured, and (il)licit media assemblages. Recent works chart media forms and practices ignored by box-office receipts, cable subscriptions, and broadband connections, as well as the assumed dominance of global Hollywood and related forms of cultural imperialism.

A few books that have been important to my own research are Brian Larkin’s *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria*, Ravi Sundaram’s *Pirate Modernity: Delhi’s Media Urbanism*, and Ramón Lobato’s *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution*. What these studies share is an inversion of the basic framework of media studies. They ask, what if instead of understanding various informal or alternative media economies (e.g., amateur, community, pirate, Nollywood) as departures from film and TV studies proper, informal networks were placed at the center of our historical and theoretical analysis? This reorientation moves scholarly attention to critical issues of access, aspiration, and innovation, and to the actually existing practices and channels that serve billions of users—many of which are disappeared or disconnected by the continued focus on formal, legal, and official structures.

Pirate networks constitute a key nexus in this research, though we should be clear that many informal practices are legal or extralegal (e.g., amateur, online videos; dubbing; fair use). The issue of piracy, however, underscores a chief problematic of informal media: the increasing illegality of everyday life—as a “pirate modernity”—for many people across the world. To be sure, *Media Piracy in Emerging Economies*, to reference an excellent study undertaken by the Social Science Research Council, is a significant area of activity. But to this we must also add the overwhelming role that illicit media cultures—analog and digital—play in the centers of the so-called first world, from high-bandwidth person-to-person cultures to various racial, linguistic, and economic communities that are squeezed out of the social.

We can summarize the import of informal media economies as follows. First, as Lobato notes, “formal theatrical exhibition is no longer the epicenter of cinema culture.” Instead, the production, distribution, and exhibition of a range of media forms are increasingly informal and off the record. We buy media artifacts at sidewalk stalls, grocery stores, restaurants, and from ambulant vendors; we download and stream them from illegal and gray-market sites; we watch them at school, on the bus, in bars, in salons, and in video clubs. Second, these informal networks, as Larkin demonstrates, constitute vital cultural and economic infrastructures—systems that are

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submerged by our routine analytical optics. The example of Nigeria’s video industry is telling. “Nollywood” produces roughly one thousand video-films annually, without state funding, studios, official distribution mechanisms, or branded film festivals. Finally, informality brings into relief a politics of access that is not limited to the Global South but should be seen as a primary texture of our global capitalist condition. The myth that piracy is a “global scourge” that endangers each of us—linked as it is to terrorists, the mafia, “Asia,” and Somalia’s coast guard—is perpetuated through a focus on piracy from the production side of the global economy. This is captured by hysterical statistics of financial loss and treatments like the RAND Corporation’s Film Piracy, Organized Crime, and Terrorism. In contrast, informality shifts our attention to the consumption side of the global economy and to the harsh divisions (in your city and over “there”) that determines who has to be a pirate and where life matters.

This latter point connects us to what we might call informal publics. What I want to signal here is that the domain of political activity for many takes place outside the realm of the state and civil society—especially, though not exclusively, in the postcolonial and postsocialist non-West. We must move away from cookie-cutter applications of the public sphere and find ways, as Partha Chatterjee submits, “to conceptualize the rest of society that lies outside the domain of modern civil society.” Chatterjee’s conceptual innovation is the idea of political society. As Nivedita Menon writes in her introduction to Empire and Nation, political society theorizes “the domain where democracy seems to be actually in action, but which meets none of the standards set by political theory for what is permitted to count as democracy—rationality, deliberation, reasonable justification, control over excess, non-violence.” Perhaps most significant, as Chatterjee and urban theorists like AbdouMaliq Simone have shown, it is these self-generating, collective practices—to which new and old media technologies are crucial—that provide the basis for theorizing the social formations of the future.

**Globality.** I want to begin to end by turning to Rey Chow’s interrogation of “self-referentiality” in her 2006 study The Age of the World Target. Chow argues that war, racism, and knowledge production are intrinsically linked in the post–World War II US-centric imagination and that its roots lie in the epistemic shifts brought about by the atomic bomb. Building on Martin Heidegger’s conception of the “world becoming a picture,” she adds that in the age of bombing, “the world has also been transformed

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22 Nivedita Menon, introduction to Empire and Nation: Selected Essays, by Partha Chatterjee, 8. See also chapter 3 of Chatterjee, Politics of the Governed.
into—is essentially conceived and grasped as—a target.” Chow adds that it is no longer possible to maintain the assumption that the features of modern warfare—“its impersonality, coerciveness, and deliberate cruelty—are ‘divergences’ from the ‘antipathy’ to violence and to conflict in the modern world.” Her approach thus underscores the militaristic agenda that targets the production of knowledge about specific areas—the Soviet Union, the Middle East, East Asia, Africa, Latin America, and so on.

The threat of such configurations, Chow notes, is that they are “self-referential”—a “circuit of targeting or getting the other that ultimately consolidates the omnipotence and omnipresence of the sovereign,” in this case the United States. My interest here is to suggest that the notion of the global is increasingly brought into this sphere of geopolitical framing or targeting. What is a global target? The question of the cultural work of the category of the global requires more analysis. How, for instance, do studies of the global perpetuate and extend a mode of targeted knowledge production institutionalized by area studies, in a different imaginational context where geopolitical boundaries have both expanded and contracted? This is not merely a problem of the vertical (e.g., area studies depth approaches) versus the transversal (comparative, multimodal frames). Rather, it has to do with what constitutes the global in disparate cultural and political frames (e.g., are some places more global than others?).

Our task is thus to pay close attention to both the overlapping impulses to produce (knowledge of) the global and, at the same time, the need to continue to rethink conceptions of a self-referential single globalization. Or, to put it another way, the pursuit of global formations includes multiple subjects and aspirations that do not provide alternatives but reframe the global as such. In this context, Bhaskar Sarkar’s incisive delineation of transnational media theory is generative. Sarkar draws our attention to two key issues related to global media. First are the “two senses of ‘global media theory’”: one having to do with the globalizing of media theory (producing global media theory, that is, knowledge about media that is global and not beholden to one particular locale), and the other relating to the theorization of global media (creating global media theory, that is, knowledge about global media forms and assemblages). Sarkar’s reframing calls into question many of the basic assumptions and frameworks that undergird seemingly transparent engagements with global media, ranging from categories like “modernity,” “nation,” “history,” “globalization,” and even “theory” to questions of style and aesthetics, as well as infrastructures for production, distribution, and exhibition. Second, he worries over the exuberant desire to give chase to the global and, in particular, to types of analysis that bypass Hollywood and other economically and culturally dominant flows. Focusing exclusively on marginal or non-Western archipelagos has the potential to reaffirm self-referential schemas: “do we

25 Ibid., 38.
26 Ibid., 41.
not pigeonhole these transnational networks simply as Hollywood’s marginal others, thereby limiting their significance?²⁸

In the context of Asia, a number of innovative research institutions and publications have emerged to address both questions of global connectivity and the productivity of inter-Asian or regional communication. This includes important research clusters like the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Society, the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, and the Asia Research Institute; and the publications *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* and the *Sarai Reader* (published annually since 2005); as well as innovative book series by Hong Kong University Press—to name just a few that are widely available in English. Each of these emphasizes regional perspectives and translation, offering a spectrum of critical work that we might summarize with the title of Chen Kuan-hsing’s 2010 monograph, *Asia as Method*.²⁹ Chen’s aim, alongside many theorists associated with inter-Asian cultural theory, is to potentiate new modes of becoming that are rooted in Asian experiences and entanglements, where Asia is not only raw material but also model and method.

To close this brief essay, I want to return to Rogoff’s opening epigraph once more. She provides a periodization of recent intellectual history that moves from a “phase of intensely analytical activity we went through during the late 1970s and the 1980s” to a period, in the 1990s and 2000s, during which new cultural objects proliferated. These new specificities, I suggest, have required new modes of research and analysis, turning our attention to problems of intermediality, informality, and globality. It is my hope that our current moment is also one in which new specificities are driving rigorous and ambitious theoretical work. To add a line to Rogoff’s summary, from my perspective, the 2010s should be animated by a (re)turn to intensely analytical activity—one marked by fresh intersections, and open to the construction of new objects of knowledge.

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²⁸ Ibid., 36–37.  
A popular film magazine in India ran a television advertisement with the following slogan in the 1980s: “You can love us. You can hate us. But you cannot ignore us.” This slogan pithily sums up how scholars of South Asian film feel about the moniker Bollywood. We defend it at conferences and parties, we include it in book titles to grab eyeballs on Google Scholar, we lament its insatiable appetite for cannibalizing other cinematic formations among peers, and we endlessly explain it in introductions to the books we write. Most of us do something with it. And we encounter it often in startlingly new ways.

In the fall of 2010 I attended what was, to my mind, an extraordinary conference called “Shah Rukh Khan and Global Bollywood.” First, an entire academic conference dedicated to a Bollywood actor—albeit a star of planetary magnitude—is unusual. To add to the novelty was the location of the conference: Vienna, Austria. Shah Rukh’s enormous fan following in Europe is common knowledge, of course, but I had assumed that the hysteria surrounding him was largely limited to the United Kingdom with its large South Asian diaspora. Vienna, with its “high culture” vibe, was another matter altogether. To my astonishment, not only did the conference attract a considerable number of globally renowned scholars of Indian film; the events organized around it also brought home just how phenomenally popular Shah Rukh Khan (and by extension, Bollywood) is in what we may consider unlikely locations.

Closer to home, a recent Heineken beer commercial features a hipster couple frantically gyrating to an old Shammi Kapoor hit from the 1960s, and my local AMC in New Jersey shows a couple of Hindi films every week. Bollywood’s steadfast popularity in the former Soviet and Middle Eastern nations and in African countries like Nigeria has also been amply documented. In short, Bollywood is not simply going places; it seems to have cast its spell all over the world. The scholarship on Indian cinema has flourished in tandem with this global visibility; almost every year in the past decade has seen the publication of multiple scholarly books on Indian film. However, as several scholars of Indian cinema have noted, Bollywood remains a

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dehistoricized, reified category whose very ubiquity tends to evacuate it of meaning. This story of spectacular planetary popularity is of somewhat recent provenance.

In the late 1990s, as I was completing a master’s degree in Jadavpur University’s Department of Film Studies, I knew I wanted to continue to study the cinema seriously. But there were hardly any schools in India at the time that granted PhDs in film studies. Happily, this is no longer the case. But back then, I was faced with a strange conundrum: to support myself while researching and writing about Indian cinema, I had to leave India. The terrifying prospect of taking the GRE prompted some friends to decamp to Britain. But British (post)graduate students were notoriously underfunded, and the romantic image of the starving scholar in a cold garret apartment did very little for me. I dabbled in journalism and the television industry for a couple of years, until Emory University’s Graduate Institute of the Liberal Arts finally offered me the kind of support I needed to be able to do the work I wanted to do. Emory was also tempting for its excellent film studies program, and I was excited about working with a faculty that included Matthew Bernstein and David Cook. In spite of all the excitement about pursuing a graduate degree in a new country, it was extremely difficult to leave all that was known and familiar behind. In those early days, as I struggled to find my footing in strange social and intellectual spaces, my research—especially the films themselves, with familiar faces, spaces, and songs—came to constitute an ersatz home away from home. And even though I have chosen to live and work here in the United States, I have never stopped feeling homesick.

When I arrived in the United States in 2001, I had no idea what to expect from the American academy. Unsurprisingly, I discovered a range of responses to Indian film—from deep interest and admiration (primarily for Satyajit Ray’s or Mrinal Sen’s work and chiefly among film scholars) to absolute ignorance and even complete lack of interest. I spent most of my graduate school years explaining to people that “Bollywood” was only one kind of cinema produced in India, that there exist robust centers of regional language and alternative cinemas in India, and that theories of Hollywood musicals are not especially useful while engaging with Indian film. I remember a particular instance during course work when I was presenting my research at a graduate seminar and happened to show a song clip from a recent Hindi hit. A fellow graduate student who was interested in camp asked if all Hindi films were equally “campy.” I spent the better part of my allotted time explaining to this colleague why camp as a critical category could not be applied willy-nilly to Indian films simply because they seemed so “delightfully over the top.” I elaborated on the modalities of film melodrama in India and the political economies that film industries are embedded within. I patiently outlined aesthetic and narrative allegiances of the popular form and some of the historical factors that have shaped it. Although my colleague’s question was motivated by genuine interest, I was exhausted by the end and also somewhat frustrated. Over the years, I have done this time and time again at various platforms—from conferences to job talks and class lectures. I have now developed a pithier, if somewhat reductive, “explanation” for Hindi commercial film’s formal complexities that can be quickly dispensed with at the beginning of any presentation that does not address scholars or students of South Asian film. This preamble typically includes a statement on the capaciousness of “Bollywood” as a category and the pitfalls involved in using it
indiscriminately. I have heard numerous anecdotes in the same vein from fellow scholars who study non-Western cinemas.

However, this scenario has also been considerably generative in terms of academic investigations and exegeses. If scholars of South Asian film routinely encounter questions that seem to reinforce the hegemony of Euro-American film theory, this has also pushed them to formulate theoretical paradigms that are historically grounded and buttressed by evidence borne by the films themselves, alongside the contexts within which they are produced and consumed. The most significant contributions to the field of Indian cinema studies are those that have productively wrestled with Western theories of cinema, found them insufficient for the task at hand, and therefore reformulated the very axes by which they frame their object of study. Neepa Majumdar’s *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only! Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s–1950s* is an excellent case in point.² Majumdar finds that theorizing female stardom in early Indian cinema through the Hollywood model—such as the construction of the star text through the complex interaction between films and extrafilmic sites, and especially a reliance on revelations about the private lives that would purport to reveal the stars’ “inner” selves—simply does not work, because the construction of stardom in the era was heavily inflected by the historical status of the cinema as a “guilty pleasure” in the national imaginary.³ “Respectable” publications focused on the public and professional lives of female stars rather than scurrilous details about their private lives and identities. Majumdar reads the terrain of female stardom as a fecund site where intersecting discourses about gender, modernity, bourgeois respectability, and an overarching national(ist) rhetoric of reform and improvement come together. This book is a trenchantly argued and elegantly written work of history and theory, with formidable attention to archival material, often in lieu of absent primary sources—the films themselves. Majumdar’s work forcefully demonstrates the limited efficacy of Anglo-American theoretical paradigms when it comes to studying formations with tangled roots and complicated historical trajectories such as the cinema in India.

Lalitha Gopalan’s *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema* is another influential example, which seeks to disengage the particularities of this cinematic tradition from the narrative of “incompleteness.”⁴ She writes, “Instead of concluding that these films stage the underdeveloped aspects of capitalism in the Indian economy, a different set of concerns nurtures this narrative form, including a desire to domesticate cinematic technology and develop a national cinematic style.”⁵ Gopalan deftly reads the “interruptions” that attend to the commercial form—the mandatory interval, song and dance sequences that punctuate narrative, textual inscriptions of censorship techniques—as *productive* tropes, arguing that these digressions and interludes, in fact, structure a distinct economy of spectatorial engagement and pleasure.

³ Ibid., 8, 9.
⁵ Ibid., 17.
The other axis of her work that I have found especially helpful is the theorization of cinephilia as a pertinent tool in reading films. Cinephilia remains an important lens in my own work, especially in engaging with Hindi cinema’s tendency to “borrow” plots, as well as stylistic and iconographic elements, from other cinemas. While the bugbear of plagiarism has acquired a particular charge and piquancy in the era of intellectual property rights, I believe that this conversation can critically be reexamined through an engagement with the modalities of cinephilia. Methodologically, Majumdar’s and Gopalan’s works have been hugely inspirational for me, even though my own research focuses on a different set of questions.

It is important to note that in the field of Indian cinema studies, the decentering or provincializing of Western theoretical edifices has not led to scholarly insularity or a thoughtless reliance on “indigenous” optics. Arguably one of the most influential books on Hindi commercial cinema, Madhava Prasad’s Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction, uses a dazzling array of critical lenses to illuminate the political imperatives of Indian cinema.6 Meshing Marxist theory with theories of psychoanalysis, Indian aesthetics, and film theory, Prasad argues that the heterogeneous and decentralized mode of manufacture accounts for the formal idiosyncrasies of Hindi cinema, wherein the narrative is but one component in a loose assemblage, alongside other “attractions” such as song-and-dance sequences, fight sequences, comedy tracks, and so forth. A formidable combination of theoretical sophistication and attention to textual detail, Prasad’s work has informed a generation of film scholars, including myself, as I sought to understand the vexed relationship between textual modes and forms of political organization. I return to this book often.

Cinema in India has imbricated the political from its earliest days. The interface between the filmic and the political has therefore been a favored topic for scholarly exegesis. Published in 2000, Ravi Vasudevan’s anthology Making Meaning in Indian Cinema brought together the most important voices in Indian cinema studies at the time, and also the diversity and range of research questions that were being posed early on.7 I have learned a great deal from this collection and from Vasudevan’s own work on melodrama. My research is particularly indebted to his analysis of staging, address, and spectatorship in the cinema of the 1950s. His interrogation of this cinema’s inscription of social codes and organization, as well as its intermittent appropriation of Hollywood’s formal strategies, has helped me rethink the political implications of melodrama vis-à-vis my own engagement with the films of this period.

These are only a few of the many books that have influenced me intellectually. I have learned most from those that engage with South Asian film through protean modes, combining rigorous theoretical paradigms with careful textual analysis, a method I try to emulate in my own work. In recent years, broad theoretical interventions that focused on the national character of the cinema in India have given way to more pointed questions about stardom, specific regional cinemas, generic formations, and particular periods of film history. New technologies, the status of cinema in the era of media convergence, revamped exhibition practices, and so on, have also been

at the forefront of recent scholarly inquiries. It is an exhilarating time to study Indian cinema, particularly because the institutions aligned with the cinema in South Asia are in constant flux, undergoing radical transformations and mutating before our eyes.

The complex story of Indian modernity and its relationship to cinema—texts, industry, and audiences—has been at the core of many of these inquiries, and this thicket of questions informs my own work in foundational and constitutive ways. While the bulk of my work focuses on Hindi commercial film, I am interested in those formations that wear the “Bollywood” mantle somewhat uneasily or elude it altogether. My current book project looks at horror and related genres of the supernatural from the late 1940s to the present. I argue that in spite of the commercial form’s investment in the fantastic, for example, in fantasy films that were popular in earlier eras, these generic constellations have always remained somewhat peripheral to mainstream genres like the social film in the 1950s or the masala films of the 1980s. These genres, I argue, offer us a different point of entry into the story of modernity, capital, and their fitful “posts” than does the spectacular Bollywood dispensation. I am especially interested in how the films in question harness a distinct economy and ecology of representation, desire, and address while simultaneously retaining the basics of the popular idiom. Some of the questions I ask in this project include, What do the horror films of the late 1970s tell us about the transforming media landscape of the period? What is the relationship of the genre to international horror formats? How were these films financed, and how did they traverse the unpredictable distribution circuits of South Asia? What can formal propensities—such as song-and-dance sequences punctuating horror narratives—tell us about the spectator being addressed? What accounts for horror’s return to the Bollywood system after a hiatus in recent years? What does this renewed investment in the supernatural tell us about Bombay cinema’s global aspirations? In answering these questions, I have found that the interface between gender, genre, and political imaginaries offers an especially intriguing framework for analysis. Theories of queerness and affect additionally inform and inflect this project in generative ways.

I situate my work in the somewhat unwieldy continuum between film history and film theory, a location that best describes my engagement with film studies as a discipline. The scholarship on Hindi horror cinema has just begun to chart a new critical course, and recent essays by Sangita Gopal, Kartik Nair, and Valentina Vitali have enabled me reflect on questions of genre, cultural production, and consumption in useful ways. They remain important interlocutors for my work on horror; their insights have helped me think through what the genre in its current iteration seeks to represent and also disavow within the Bollywood configuration.

Globally trendy labels like “Bollywood,” “Lollywood,” and “Nollywood” (referring to the cinemas of India, Pakistan, and Nigeria, respectively) notwithstanding, it is best to accept that research and teaching of non-Western cinemas remains very much a “niche” interest in the West. (This is, no doubt, exacerbated by the increasing

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marginalization of film studies within the larger field of media studies, as Laura Horak reminds us elsewhere in this section). Those of us who study these cinemas can hope to find employment only in a certain tier of schools—large public universities or private schools located in big cities. While I have been successful on the job market, I have never proceeded beyond initial interviews at smaller, liberal arts colleges or teaching institutions. The problem is that we are not seen as generalists, which, in fact, we are. I do not know a single scholar of Indian cinema whose training did not include wide exposure to Western cinematic traditions. And many of us who are lucky enough to have secured those highly coveted “non-Western cinema” jobs are able to teach our areas only in broad “world cinema” courses. I am fully cognizant of my enviable position in these troubled times. The Cinema Studies program at Rutgers not only is deeply committed to the study of global and transnational cinemas but also is also located in a state where almost everyone knows what Bollywood is; each semester, I have students who are enthusiastic about engaging with it in a serious manner. However, I am also keenly aware of the fact that my situation—and that of others who work in similarly supportive and affirming environments—remains somewhat exceptional. As the academic job market continues to be in flux, I am anxious about the scholars who are graduating and hope to secure employment in film studies departments and programs. As Racquel Gates so forcefully writes in her own essay in this section, I, too, “worry that incoming graduate students will enter their programs with an overly determined game plan designed to land them a job upon degree completion.” This will mean that fewer people will choose to study something as “risky” as Indian cinema in the American academy. Without the influx of new blood, surely the field will atrophy and dwindle even before it has consolidated properly?

At the last Society of Cinema and Media Studies conference in Boston, all of us who study South Asian cinema had gathered for dinner one evening. I was thrilled to note that there are now enough of us to sit around two large tables, which was not the case even five years ago. Clearly, our numbers are swelling, and it’s so heartening to meet new scholars at each conference. However, even as I am excited to note the new voices and the dazzling array of new research and methodologies they bring to the table, I remain apprehensive about the market, which already seems somewhat glutted. I can only hope that schools—big and small, those that are research institutions as well as those that are focused on teaching—will realize the importance of exposing their students to subjects like Indian cinema as part of an overall liberal arts training. But we, as scholars and teachers, have to do our bit to reinforce the critical and political significance of our subjects within the university and, if possible, in the larger communities within which we live and work. Taking a cue from the Swedish academics described by Horak, perhaps it is time to begin conversations with the larger public who are invested in what we do within the university setting. Who knows, we may be able to unearth other sources of support and funding that could create endowments or even postdoctoral fellowships in our areas. Even if only a couple of young scholars are able to follow their “intellectual tangents” as Gates and I were able to do, it would be worth it.

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Contributors

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