

WILLIAM URICCHIO

Things to Come in the American Studies-Media Studies Relationship

Any endeavor that seeks to sketch an emerging cluster of ‘issues, themes, directions, and perspectives’ on the cusp of the millennium and at the intersection of two dynamic fields such as American and Media Studies faces an immediate dilemma. Should the endeavor be framed as continuity or rupture? Should one address the long-morphing tropes of the past, exploring their latest undulations for signs of novelty? Or instead seek out sites of change, arguing for the *deus ex machina* of the new? Both approaches, of course, have their limits, particularly given the dynamics of the academy where things are both bound in tradition and yet constantly reinvented.

In the case of American Studies, such (relatively) *longue durée* debates as those between proponents of American exceptionalism and those of a counter-notion that embraces the popular as a practice or “structure of feeling” have done much to give form to the field (Pease and Wiegman). The understanding of American culture as deterritorialized from the geopolitical entity of the United States, as a palimpsest experienced through differently situated identities demarcated by race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, and as a site of contestation, have all shaped the eternal return of scholars to a shared corpus of texts and methodologies. The residues of the past – layer upon layer of interpretation and meaning, crystallized *Zeitgeist* in the form of edited volumes – together with the ongoing work of journals and reviews that keep the discursive metabolism moving along, all help to constitute a field. In preparing this essay, I’ve considered with great interest at those moments when the field looks back,

appraising its own contours, or when it looks ahead, extrapolating from those contours to imagine what lies beyond the horizon (e.g., *American Studies at 50*). These debates and assessments serve as useful checks against which to situate my own experiences and views, and, in a way, they have encouraged me to look more creatively for new directions – and perhaps even dimensions – in the relationship between American and Media studies.

Before getting to this, however, I'd first like to locate the relevance of media at a macro level by considering the fast-changing ecosystem of the university – and the humanities in particular. The role of media in these broader changes to some extent bears a synecdochal relationship to the pairing under discussion.

The academic worlds that I inhabit are showing increasing signs of stress as the traditional organizing principles of the humanities (broadly construed) face the pressures of both external and internal factors. External factors include funding cuts and what sometimes reads as a growing disaffection (especially on the part of neo-liberal pragmatists and anti-intellectual conservatives) with the traditions of critical reflection and interpretive engagement long represented by the humanities. Internal factors include increasingly blurred disciplinary boundaries, provoked in part by new research questions together with a growing sense that common cultural cause and competence are quickly eroding. This disciplinary blurring has been both positively framed as a sign that the academy is responsive to ever-changing cultural conditions, and negatively framed as evidence of a steady collapse of cultural order. Winfried Fluck has astutely mapped some of the internal dynamics driving the ever-faster cycles of canon formation and ever-accreting layers of new paradigms that complicate this situation even further, and that have inhibited strategic response by the academy. Taking the long view, I would situate both external and internal factors as signs of a larger shift in our notion of the university.

We today inhabit a university structure that, for all of its roots in the legacy of the *Trivium* and *Quadrivium*, is in fact a creature of the Industrial Age. As we shift inexorably towards an information-based political economy, the university is experiencing the strains of hewing to its inherited model of cultural reproduction (as argued by Bourdieu) and coping with its

fast-changing environment. The university is not immune from the shifts in organizational logic that are increasingly manifest in the cultural industry and the larger processes of governmentality that envelop us all. Such divergent collaborative endeavors as *Wikipedia* and *Twitter* suggest the emergence of radical, new organizing principles, and we are seeing their impact in places ranging from the music and news industries (music file sharing and collaborative news networks) to the organization of political action (the ‘Arab Spring,’ ‘Occupy Wall Street’). Yet, still garbed in medieval tradition and girded by a commitment to reproduction, the academy has been resistant to change and slow to adapt. This resistance, however, will make the inevitable transformation that much more abrupt and painful when it comes.¹

I mention this because more than mere occupational myopia makes me think that media occupy a central place in these developments. First, the technological order in which media are deeply integrated has been drawn upon to circumvent traditional hierarchies of approval and control. In this sense, traditional media industries, and the challenges posed by peer-to-peer exchanges and networked culture to their centralized structures of cultural control, have modeled a set of changes that may be headed our way in the academy. Second, media institutions and practices are not only undergoing their own (painful) shift from centralized to decentralized organization structure, but the new affordances of social media have been used to effect change in a variety of civic settings (as noted, from the Middle East to Wall Street). This is to say that media have provided tools and platforms that have been put to use for change. And third, the media have served as our primary site of representation of these issues, the conduits through which we receive and share information. Whether as a model of change, an instrument of

¹ As I write this, consortia of major American universities are scrambling to establish online educational operations that go far beyond the old ‘distance learning’ paradigm, and seek to harness collaborative behaviors as they develop social media and educational hybrids. MIT and Harvard, for example, announced their joint venture, edX, in May 2012.

change, or a site where change is represented, media have loomed large in the ongoing transformation of our society, and, with it, our universities.

1. Coming to Terms

Before exploring the place of media in early twenty-first century American Studies, it is worth dwelling for a moment on precisely what we mean by the term ‘media.’ Stanley Fish’s *Is There a Text in This Class* comes to mind, since, in common parlance, the polysemy of the term ‘media’ allows certain sentence constructions to have quite different meanings. Depending upon the setting, ‘media’ might refer to the conjuncture of technological platforms and behavioral protocols that we deploy when communicating (e.g., our use of the telephone; Gitelman); it might refer to the industries that dominate the ownership and operations of these communication systems (e.g., Hollywood); and it might even refer to a conflated sense of both the systems (platforms, protocols, and ownership patterns) and the content they carry (e.g., the daily news or feature films). This last and most slippery category, usually deployed with the direct article (‘the media’), appears most frequently as an epithet in the hands of those critical of a particular sector of cultural production. Throughout this paper, I’ll use media in the first sense that I mentioned, taking it as a cultural practice that involves both technologies and social behaviors. While I’ll generally stay within the term’s traditional domain (print, photography, film, television, recorded sound, telephony, interactive media, social media ...), outside of this paper, I take media as a much more extensive concept, broad enough to include architecture, sculpture, and currency (Uricchio).

Definitions matter, not the least because they tell us much about a society and its cultures. The debates in the US over the film medium in the first decades of the twentieth century, for example, reveal social fault-lines in terms of exclusion zones (racial and ethnic segregation), perceived vulnerabilities (women and children; ‘excitable foreigners’), and sites of

anxiety (unauthorized heterosexual contact; the contagion of the lower classes). Indeed, at a time of significant cultural reification, media were part of a broader set of demarcations between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ helping simultaneously to assimilate the problematic masses and to bolster the dominant classes’ cultural authority through the circulation of figures such as George Washington, Shakespeare’s plays, and the nation’s flag (all major tropes recognized and embraced by the early US film industry; Uricchio and Pearson). One of the ironies of this early nickelodeon period was the inadvertent stimulation of cinema by legally deploying a strict definition of the medium (a platform and protocol) rather than allowing the definition to slip into function and content (amusement). The ‘Blue Laws,’ designed to discipline the lower orders through the Sunday closings of entertainments, exempted mechanical devices – the basis of early film’s legal definition – thus sparing motion pictures from ban. By the 1910s and after, the definitional debates over film helped to distinguish a different ‘us’ and ‘them,’ this time targeting the importing of ‘foreign’ films (and with them, demoralizing values), and extolling the value of exporting US films (in the language of the Wilson administration, equating “one foot of film with one dollar in trade”).

Much the same holds true with today’s definitions. Film has, for many in the West, become synonymous with Hollywood. A decade-long study of Hollywood film reviews in Dutch newspapers revealed a high frequency of terms such as ‘big-budget,’ ‘special effects,’ ‘stars,’ ‘superficial,’ and ‘happy endings’; non-Hollywood film reviews showed no such word correlation (unless preceded by a negative). The predictability of Hollywood fare, whether in narrative terms or production values, seems to have emerged as an important characteristic in a medium that asks its customers to pay first, and then walk into a dark room for fulfillment. Whatever the case, it seems that the vernacular definition of ‘film’ (and increasingly ‘television’) approximates something like the mainstream commercial US manifestations of these media, not the myriad other forms that they take (such as other national cinemas, art, experimental and independent film). In Iwabuchi’s terms, Hollywood’s products have become “odorless” while local products give off a “fragrance” not for the faint of heart (27).

This process is ongoing, and one can find definitional struggles in such domains as intellectual property (US law recognizes its media products as works-for-hire, not acts of authorship, as is the case for most European nations) or Internet providers (the still-contested ‘net-neutrality’ debate, which will determine the character of the Internet as either an expansive egalitarian frontier or a commodified space of transaction). In both of these cases, attempts to impose or extend American definitions make use of the weapons of popular association and international treaties. Even within the US, where the Obama administration has given temporary respite to the opposition (and where the Electronic Frontier Foundation continues to contest corporate lobbying efforts), there is no definitional unanimity. It remains to be seen whether these newer media will go the same way as film and television before them.

Definitions are equally at play with most constructions that assert the national identity of media. ‘Hollywood,’ the ‘American film industry,’ and the ‘American press’ in fact belie multinational corporate ownership, with concentrations of stock in Japanese, French, German, and Australian hands. Although most of Hollywood’s products are inscribed, from a content perspective, within an American vernacular, half or more of a typical film’s income is expected to come from outside the US market, and production personnel are as likely as not to come from outside the US, making the nature of that vernacular loaded with signification.

The rapid proliferation of global network connectivity in the last decade of the twentieth century has also done much to erode some of the trade barriers that once helped to enforce – and define – national cultural spheres. For much of the twentieth century, the US enjoyed an unchallenged position as a net exporter of entertainment-centered media products, with many countries struggling to protect their domestic markets and cultures. In the early 1990s, the US defended the aggressive export of its audio-visual products by shifting to ideological grounds, re-defining its media products as information and advocating the ‘free flow of information.’ In so doing, the US trade negotiators presciently signaled the changing materiality of media in an increasingly digital age, when texts that once existed on vinyl, celluloid, and paper became reagggregated as digital data – as information.

This definitional shift was not without implication, with digitized Japanese forms like Anime and Manga slipping into the American market, and ‘American’ cultural texts (both industrial and from a whole new cohort of domestic producers) finding new niches in the world, whether legitimately or not (Condry). A new “mediascape”, to borrow Appadurai’s term (9), took form, provoking new cultural flows, allowing new ways of encountering – and using – media texts, and having new implications for American culture. This moment of accelerated and sometimes uncontrolled flow would have direct consequences for the study of American culture.

The proliferation of VCRs and tape cassettes in the early 1980s helped to change the cultural landscape, giving people much wider access to the film medium (which until that point was largely restricted to theatrical and televisual performance), opening up both historical productions and a wider range of national titles. It allowed users to record television programs, to time shift and, even more radically, to share programs across borders. Audio cassettes afforded their listeners not only new mobilities, but vastly expanded collections based on friendship (and piracy) rather than sales. The slide away from the industry’s highly centralized release patterns to more user-centric affordances and logics continued in the mid-1990s with the introduction of new recordable digital media, this time without tape’s generational degradation. And the networking of digitalized content shortly thereafter brought us to the current era of creative transgression, in which, despite the industry’s best efforts, viewers and listeners understand their digitally mediated texts less as commodities, bought and paid for, than as relationships and sites of identity. While probably not intended by the US GATT negotiators who argued for the ‘free flow of information,’ these emerging behaviors set the stage for new cultural flows as well as a reimagining of the old logics of production and consumption. The shift, signaled by low cost information and digital technologies as well as an emerging ethos of aggregation, curation, and cutting-and-mixing, was emblemized by the rise in cultural importance of the DJ and the decline of the traditional star. Here, too, shifting definitions of media and participation traced a profound shift in cultural and economic behaviors.

2. American Studies and Media

I remember sitting through Fulbright Commission board meetings in Amsterdam with growing frustration. The three main chairs, instruments designed to bring senior scholars to the Netherlands, were closely defined to support the country's American Studies programs. I was an outlier, a professor of Media Studies, arguing that American Studies and Media Studies could both benefit from the likes of Robert Sklar or Andrew Ross. But no – the chairs reflected the core disciplines on which the field was built: Literature, History and Political Science. Despite that orthodox view, media, in fact, have a long and largely unacknowledged role in the field as Alan Trachtenberg's work on photography, Daniel Czitrom's work on journalism, or countless other scholars' work attests. Film texts have regularly been interpreted, much as literature, deploying hermeneutic operations for insights into whatever the dominant interest of the moment happens to be – multi-culturalism, self-representation, the encounter with the Other. A quick look at the American Studies literature reveals no significant prejudice against including popular media, whether film, television programs, or, increasingly, games. However, the homogeneity of method and approach masks the underlying heterogeneity of media forms and engagements. Issues of media industry, technology or, until recently, even media specificity, have been less evident – with a few important exceptions (David Nye's work on technology and Michael Denning's on audiences loom large here).

As 'studies' areas within the US academy, both Media Studies and American Studies necessarily enjoy definitional latitude, crossing disciplinary lines with ease and sometimes overlapping with existing disciplines to the point that one is hard pressed to differentiate one from the other. I will not here rehearse the definitional undulations of both fields, but simply want to chart their main sites of interaction. Media (in all senses of the term) have served as *cultural evidence*, offering scholars of American Studies access to sites of national identity and self-expression, to debates over values and the representation of history, and to the segmenting of

publics and audiences. They have served as sites of *cultural extension*, whether advertent (the efforts of the US State Department and various US trade commissions) or inadvertent (the promotional implications of the music, film, and television industries). They have served a *metaphoric role*, embodying a range of American assertions such as ‘free and open’ trade and consumerism on one hand, and Fordist production logics and the alleged ‘banality’ characteristic of the culture in its critics’ eyes on the other. Indeed, at times, the association has been sufficiently strong that in some national settings, US media products have been seen in a synechdocal relationship to America, with the movie theater, or television set, or comic book, or transistor radio all being seen as American outposts. And finally, most often outside of the US, ‘American’ media have offered a site of *contrast, re-working, and self-definition* to those seeking to distinguish themselves from its project.

The steady erosion of the cultural canon in post-1970s America, combined with the ‘reception turn’ and the coincident rise of Cultural Studies, all enabled a new class of popular cultural forms to vie for academic legitimacy. Even Media Studies, which had for decades concerned itself almost exclusively with film (film as art through a ‘high theory’ lens), finally included television in its remit. American Studies, too, expanded its remit from ‘significant’ texts and dominant historical narratives to include a much wider range of texts and practices, including ‘underrepresented,’ ‘mass,’ and ‘popular’ cultures – the ghetto that media were generally assumed to inhabit. Considering our students’ growing familiarity with (‘American’) media products and the coincident and steady erosion of the long established literary canon and American historical chronicle, this expansion was well-timed. Moreover, the expansion of the corpus of texts and framing strategies studied within American Studies did much to complement certain sectors of Media Studies, lacking as the latter were in cultural contextualization, leading to a growing reciprocity evident during the last decade or so of the twentieth century.

The 2010 special *Film* issue of *The European Journal of American Studies*, using the particular entry point of European film-makers and their treatment of the United States, typifies this range of approaches. The work is

generally fine and I intend no critique by saying that methodologically, conceptually, it is rooted in the paradigms of the last century. These approaches continue to yield, and there is no reason whatsoever to abandon them. I mention this special *EJAS* issue, however, because of the editors' call for an "open" discussion and their embrace of the affordances of the "web" in order to continue to accept relevant essays and to facilitate exchange.² This latter functionality, it strikes me, is the site of something new, something with implications for the field. It emblemizes more than just an expanded publication venue, pointing beyond to redefined relations between editors, authors, and their readers, a new dimensionality in texts and our access to and interactions with them.

These developments help anecdotally to locate the conditions against which an emerging cluster of 'issues, themes, directions, and perspectives' has more recently appeared, one inexorably bound up with changes in media technology and reach. Just as with media's earlier *pas de deux* with American Studies, the media constitute an important aspect of the culture (providing a scaffold for networks of affiliation and taste hierarchies) and help to shape access to it while at the same time representing it. The rapid growth of social media networks and the continued project of the digitalization of culture both figure prominently on all of these levels. The result is a mix of new phenomena (new patterns of cultural production and circulation), new modes of access (distribution channels, both legitimate and not), new practices (cutting-and-mixing, aggregating, annotating, re-purposing, and so on), and of course, new questions, research areas, and even research methods.

² The editors state: "The questions raised here in terms of the contribution made by European film-makers to the representation of the United States as either a unified or diverse and pluralistic nation are clearly very broad ones indeed. Consequently, this issue of the *EJAS* web journal and the articles it contains are envisaged as only the start of a wider discussion. The issue itself will remain 'open' and further contributions will be welcomed" (Stokes and Sipièrè).

3. New Directions

Where are the exemplary sites of research, the new paradigms and methods in that space of conjuncture between American Studies and Media Studies, now that we are well into the twenty-first century? There are many contenders, of course, most extending the ongoing processes of development rooted firmly in the twentieth century. Some others, perhaps the most contested, are creatures of two particular legislative acts: the pre-9/11 Digital Millennium Copyright Act (1998)³ and the post 9/11 Patriot Act (2001), both of which enabled unparalleled levels of government surveillance and repression of – among other things – certain forms of cultural production, distribution, and consumption. These politically motivated laws were driven, on the one hand, by the heavy industry of media in an attempt to control the new behaviors enabled by digitization and networked communities; and, on the other, by an ultra-conservative government concerned with monitoring its citizenry and obsessed with the pursuit of deviant and terrorist activities. Both resulted in the surveillance of internet and library use, the tracking of peer-to-peer exchanges, and a culture of paranoia – phenomena that have yet to receive proper critical and academic attention. Besides mentioning these areas as worthy of serious research, with the warning that engaging in such research may well constitute the suspicious behaviors that can result in prosecution through secret court proceedings, I will say no more, instead moving on to discuss what I take to be four other important areas for investigation.

3.1 Production Studies

In the wake of the interest generated by reception studies in the 1970s and after, scholars of production studies – concerned with the close analysis of the logics, ownership patterns, work routines, and materialities of media

³ This legislation bears many similarities to Europe's Copyright Directive [Directive 2001/29/EC].

production – made several fitful but largely unsuccessful attempts to establish their place in the academy. Their association with political economy, a crucially important sub-field of Media Studies that quickly waned in the US following the fall of the Berlin Wall, is one reason for this failure. The ever-growing complexity of the industry in an age of trans-media corporate consolidation was another. A third reason was provided by the coincident emergence of the World Wide Web and the acceleration of networked behaviors that served as a magnet for scholarly attention. In any case, the last decade has seen a surprising resurgence of interest in the area, with a number of fine-grained studies of how production decisions are made, how signifying practices broker the representation process, and how processes such as localization take place. These have been particularly interesting from an American Studies perspective.

Several years ago, I visited a Basque television station (EITB: Euskal Irrati Telebista). The facility was praised as exemplary for maintaining Basque culture, which made the fact that the main studio was filled with the set of the Basque version of *The Wheel of Fortune* that much more surprising. Syndication and transnational program format flow are nothing new, but exploring the logics of production with a Basque team as it lit the set for what in their eyes was a Basque production, completely informed by standards (lighting, camera angle, set design) borrowed from the US, is a revealing project. The format becomes a contact zone of sorts, a place where two cultures meet and negotiate. But most striking about this visit was that, as far as I could tell from my brief tour, language and casting were the main dimensions of localization: the set was immediately recognizable from its American counterpart, as were the lighting conventions and the behaviors of the host and contestants. And yet, it was seen as a Basque achievement. The overarching discourse was one of professionalism, not national or even product identification, but a professionalism that inscribed within it an inadvertent articulation of assumptions about a medium and, through it, an imagined America.

Jerome Bourdon's work on the historically 'self-inflicted' Americanization of European television greatly develops this notion, drawing on detailed studies of the production process to build the case.

Bourdon's research explores US State Department-financed study trips to Hollywood for European television makers in the early 1950s, and the adoption of American television formats by many European networks. In some nations, set and lighting design, musical interludes, formats for news and entertainment shows, even casting decisions all reveal patterns of cultural transfer at the level of signifying practices. Add to this a new-found interest in corporate behaviors such as a reliance on audience monitoring data (ratings) and the explicit licensing of dubbed American programming, and the result is the appearance throughout much of Europe of television that increasingly converged around American practice. Period and subsequent discourse reveals an overarching ambivalence regarding what, precisely, was transferred: American cultural values? A transnational sense of professionalism? Best practices? This ambivalence, in turn, masked a larger debate regarding cultural identity, even during the decades when for some cultural elites American popular culture was disdained. While certain types of programming (particularly imports) were seen as 'American,' the deeper American influences on signifying practices, professional norms, and, in some cases, the medium's organization, all slipped through untainted, and, at times, were even praised as signs of local excellence. As Hollywood had done with film before it, television – on the level of programming and signifying practices – managed to slip almost unnoticed from a medium with pluriform characteristics to a medium with 'American' characteristics. American television increasingly functioned as the vernacular, and the best part was that this association played itself out on the level of quotidian production and the European industry's own perceptions of professionalism (thus, Bourdon's notion of 'self-inflicted'). The production-centric approach of researchers like Bourdon locates the micro-technologies of cultural exchange and meaning, and this work has recently gained momentum in an academic framework that privileges identity rather than a more abstracted sense of ideology.

Production studies offer a way to examine and better understand the reference systems used in the crafting of texts. As Carlo Ginzburg argues about Morelli's (art-historical) methodology (or Sherlock Holmes' or Freud's), the inadvertent detail – the painted earlobe or fingernail in

Morelli's case – can reveal profound insights. A better understanding of how signifying practices take form and how their creators think about them can help us understand the processes by which styles and norms associated with the American media industry shape the horizon of expectations for certain non-US-based media makers and their audiences. This is particularly interesting given the continual cross-fertilization of various styles, the way, for example, that German Expressionism was reworked in the US studios, appearing in horror films (*Frankenstein*) and *films noir* (many of which were directed by émigré filmmakers), only to be exported back to Europe as an American style in the many 'new waves' of the 1960s. The claim here is not one of wholesale adaptation, but rather one of the significant details, and particularly the ability of production studies to uncover the motives for particular stylistic choices and the references for certain norms of professional practice.

3.2 Digitalization

A second, more methodological innovation concerns the impact of digitalization, a process that has centrally to do with understanding texts as mediated and malleable packets of information. Actually, digitalization is a misnomer, since the practice goes back at least to the sixteenth century, and here I mean digitalization in both computerized and networked senses. In the context of research in American Studies, the process has two main implications.

The *first* regards availability: ongoing digitalization efforts combined with robust networks have opened up an array of once difficult-to-acquire texts for anyone with a decent computer connection. Collections of periodicals, pamphlets, photographs, books, films, and papers of relevance to American Studies scholars were long restricted to archives or held by a select few museums and libraries. Now, thanks to the digitized collections of institutions such as the Library of Congress or journals such as *Life Magazine*, these materials are available with the click of a mouse to scholars, students, and interested members of the public. A second

dimension of availability is apparent in the supplementary role played by social tagging (in addition to top-down metadata). Here, a dynamic and socially responsive set of meanings can be appended to texts, greatly facilitating access. In the hyperbolic framing of the digital era, both of these trends might be seen as democratizing access and opening up resources for research. These collections, the networks of libraries that make them available, and socially responsive tagging systems have facilitated the research project, bringing a much wider array of texts and sources to bear on any particular topic. Finally, a third dimension of availability builds on the principle of social tagging and uses crowd-sourcing to collect data about artifacts and occurrences (stories, local information, identification of people, locations, and images). The Library of Congress's posting of selected images on *Flickr* and its openness to user comments produce an occasional gem of information for researchers, and have engaged a wider public in reflecting upon the process of cultural representation.⁴ All of these behaviors have expanded access to collections and increased the potential for the greater public to participate in the construction of meaning.

The *second* implication of digitalization regards the increasing ability of computer systems to access and analyze these digitized texts, enabling new types of queries. Humanistic research ultimately turns on pattern recognition, and the so-called 'digital humanities' have been developing tools and methodologies that make use of large data sets and are capable of revealing myriad patterns. The resulting patterns are not, to be sure, interpretive acts, but they work in tandem with the hermeneutic act, offering users the ability to assess massive amounts of data and locate sites of potential interest for further investigation and interrogation. These new functionalities and the ability to process vast amounts of data promise to bring dramatic changes to the study of America, its culture, its meanings, and reception. We can now, with relative ease, trace patterns of textual dissemination; develop critical digital texts; engage in new kinds of textual production, easily combining image, sound, and text; and consider the possibilities of curation as a critical intellectual act. Our students are

⁴ <http://www.flickr.com/photos/library_of_congress/>.

increasingly at ease in a world of annotation, aggregation, and remixing, and it takes no great stretch of the imagination to think that these techniques can be critically deployed as new forms of scholarship and pedagogy take form.

Augmented reality, for example, draws on geographical information systems and visualization techniques to append and layer information on particular locations. This allows the extension of the archive to the street, the inscription of meaning, text, and argument to relevant locations, and the stimulation and recording of dialogues with interested members of the public. Although the digital turn seems to be something of a diffused practice, we need to recall its medium specificity both as a platform and body of user protocols. The term ‘medium’ may not immediately spring to mind, but it is nevertheless the remediation of existing texts (themselves mediated) that has enabled this shift in how and what we research and who is doing the researching.

3.3 Social Media

A third ‘new’ area where Media Studies and American Studies align in interesting ways is social media – perhaps best known through applications such as *Twitter* and *Facebook*, but in fact a robust set of affordances that we are only beginning to understand. They serve as fine-grained sites of cultural expression in which users can communicate their perceptions to chosen community members with minimum effort, exchange ideas, and build affiliations. Unlike the centralized media forms of the past, social media enable a vastly different register of voices to be heard, and more tightly defined bands of kinship and community to emerge and be rehearsed. If representations of America can be gleaned through literature or film, what insights might these far more collectivized expressive acts hold? The rapid uptake of social media has rightly triggered a set of anxieties ranging from privacy of personal data to the social consequences of identity communities inhabiting their own echo chambers, rather than sharing the experience of common culture as provided by centralized media. In some ways, they put to test the analytic insights of the past two decades regarding identity politics;

and in others, they have demonstrated new possibilities for civic engagement and action.

These networks now serve as repositories of cultural perceptions – and cultural productions – in ways that lack significant precedent. They provide a hitherto unachievable level of insight into the lives of ‘ordinary’ (if demographically distinctive) people. And better, analytic tools are increasingly available to analyze aggregated texts and depict linking behaviors both on the basis of social nodes and on the basis of words. Our methodologies are still poorly developed, but they are evolving quickly. Since these media (particularly of the *Facebook* variety) also embody culturally-bound notions of socialization and affiliation, they are also useful from sociological and ethnographic perspectives, offering data about group behaviors and community formation. And since these media are used both within and outside the US, they offer sites to compare cultural behaviors (the oft-caricatured differences between American and European notions of sociability), and a new opportunity to explore how media forms are associated – or not – with American cultural norms. In any event, social media as a new condition have implications for the study of American culture on both textual and relational levels, as both a research domain and a research tool.

3.4 Cultural Flows

Finally, I would like to underscore a condition mentioned earlier regarding a trend that has accelerated since the end of the twentieth century – the global cultural exchanges that take place both legally and not with news, music, television, film, and, increasingly, e-books. New logics of distribution, or, as Nicholas Negroponte put it, the shift from atoms to bits, have largely displaced the movement of physical artifacts with the flows of information. In some ways, this point overlaps with the previous categories of ‘social networks’ and ‘digitalization,’ although I have used both rather restrictively. In this case, the issue is one of a new temporality and the havoc it is creating in a world still organized around the heavy industries of media. The

industrial view sees media products as commodities requiring unitized production, monetarization, and control. Time is carefully regulated by most media industries, whether in terms of release windows to primary, secondary, and tertiary markets for film, or the logics of television syndication, or proximity-based pricing of financial information. The global nature of the media distribution has exacerbated the challenges of controlling time, resulting in staged releases of films, television programs, and books, complete market black-outs, and region-encrypted DVDs (and DVD players).

Restrictive intellectual property (IP) laws have posed challenges to a connected world. When ABC's *Lost* began its launch, extensive use was made of the Internet for hints, promos and – once launched – blog coverage, a *Lostpedia* (a *Wikipedia*-like site devoted to all things *Lost*), and real-time clues for the broadcast program. Both the program's American broadcasting outlet (ABC) and its fan base made extensive use of the Internet, and crowd-sourcing became both the means to drive the program's success for the network, and to solve the intricate mystery for the fans. Fans in Europe had no difficulty receiving all of the Internet discussions and clips, but they were barred from viewing the television programs at the center of the action. Attempts to view the show from outside the US on ABC's website or YouTube resulted in a black screen with a statement saying that the program was not available in this region. In the case of a suspenseful and socially-driven narrative like *Lost*, fans faced a difficult dilemma: to keep up with the on-line (American) fan community, and thus find ways to 'steal' the program; or to somehow opt out, knowing that the program would come to a local broadcaster a half a year later but that the community will have dissipated. The dilemma is similar to waiting a few months to watch the World Cup playoffs on your local television – there is something to be said for social energy.

Variations of this story abound, and the dissonant temporalities and spatial reach of the Internet (immediate and more or less global) and media such as film, television, music, and print (asynchronous, centralized, and bound by physical or broadcast form) are doomed to collide. The time lag between the American release of content and its appearance in other parts of

the world has provoked a battery of responses that often pit US copyright holders (and their local proxies) against the industry's most passionate fans in Europe (or elsewhere). It has also pitted legacy content providers (the studios) against those who control the pipelines of distribution and the technologies of reproduction. In some cases (Sony, for example), one division of the corporation struggles to control its IP while another sells technologies with the sole purpose of circumventing it.

The Internet has emerged as a platform for cultural exchange, both in the sense of critical discourse and in the sense of the literal exchange of cultural artifacts. To the extent that fan affiliations can now take transnational form, and to the extent that the pace of global cultural flow has accelerated, nationally-specific IP regimes and cultural trade barriers are being undermined. Indeed, it seems that cultural and national loyalties can be disambiguated, leading to a growing dilemma for those who identify with cultural sub-groups. In an era increasingly defined by the deterritorialized logics of social media, the territorialization of culture is under siege.

This stand-off repeats a tension evident in certain countries and at certain moments throughout the twentieth century (such as the post-WWII era), when the United States government sought to contain or counterbalance American (popular) culture. However, this latest instantiation renders trivial the concerns with the 'demoralizing' potential of some popular culture recurrent in the twentieth century. Its very terms of participation require legal transgression; an active fandom is necessarily a criminal fandom. Proponents of the fans who are locked out of contact with the sites of their affection see it differently. This behavior is not criminal, but rather a creative solution to a poor business decision, a response to the heavy industry of media through its distributed digital counterpart, a transitional problem. But the industry's challenge is also the nation's, with the near instantaneous circulation of information, 24-hour news and market cycles, and hyper-accelerated response times testing the limits of the old strategies for self-representation. The shift from the carefully paced temporalities and demarcated and enforced spatialities of legacy media to the near neural-networks of the digital brings with it radical alterations in the ways that we have long understood cultural circulation. The shape-shifting ability of

audiences to become publics, and for publics to call upon a great diversity of information, to re-work it, to talk back, all suggest the makings of a dynamic that will bear fundamentally on the United States and other nations, and on American and other cultural practices and concepts.

4. In Closing

Issues? Themes? Directions? Perspectives? If I consider what has changed fundamentally in the first decade of this new century, it is a series of conditions, of circumstances. Aside from production studies, which might best be inscribed as directions or perspectives, the categories of digitalization, social media, and cultural flows all represent new opportunities (or challenges) with direct implications for the organization of culture. These are vast areas, of course, and yet I think they have specific relevance for the project of American Studies. They bear centrally on issues of representation, but make the processes of popular negotiation far more tangible and accessible than earlier media practices. They enable new logics of distribution and circulation, not only vastly complicating the contained practices of earlier media forms, but leaving network traces that are themselves available as data. They are providing us with new ways to access, aggregate, annotate, and analyze cultural practices, be they the traditional domains of American culture or the expressive practices of marginalized social formations, whether inside the United States or outside. They offer a means not only of accessing more and different information, but also of finding new patterns, of demonstrating new relationships. And they hold promise in terms of developing a public pedagogy, of extending the archive, the museum, even the scholarly gaze, to the world outside; of drawing on the public for information and insight; of engaging and conversing with those who, too often in the past, were simply on the margins.

It can – correctly, I think – be argued that I err on the side of a utopian reading of the new affordances in three of the four areas I mentioned. Tools are only as good as the people who use them; and I am primarily interested

in their potentials for the study of culture – particularly the study of a media hegemon now caught in an extremely interesting dilemma. Of course the larger processes, of which these practices are part, are themselves topics of widespread debate, generating both anxiety and hope. The implications for American Studies are more proximate, as I've said, bearing on the projects of representation, distribution, and reception in fundamental ways. Most tangibly, the factors I've mentioned have a simple but powerful potential. Whereas much scholarship in American Studies (like Media Studies) has been text-centric and concerned above all with media as representation encountered through the hermeneutic act, those other capacities of media – their ability to extend and connect communities, to serve as an instrument and model of change – are now harder to ignore or circumvent. The single greatest change confronting us is acknowledging that media entail more than representation, and finding ways to harvest this excess. This excess, always there but far too long ignored, now has an urgency and promise that are obvious and unavoidable, and highly relevant for both American and Media Studies.

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