Rethinking Discursive Practices

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Introduction: Rethinking Discursive Practices

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Articles in this spring 2010 issue of The Projector are related to essays in the fall 2009 issue, for they echo the type of meta-discursive analysis of critical practices in film, media, and cultural studies found in those fall essays. While each article in the spring issue is a standalone piece, when the authors’ arguments are considered together, they could or should draw attention to the fact that regardless of discipline, established positions in scholarship warrant particular scrutiny, if only because they so profoundly influence the questions that academics ask about aesthetic, cultural, and material practices.

The essays in this issue show that overlooked but fraught ideological positions lie at the base of seemingly objective or scholarly views about: the significance of individual performers; presumed breaks with traditional modes of visual representation; official divisions between art and artifact; and purportedly unambiguous divisions between cultural-aesthetic movements like modernism and postmodernism. The essays also call for scholarship that reckons seriously with “the nexus of culture and power” and is consciously oriented toward “developing intellectual and theoretical work as a political practice” that enables people to see that consuming material from what Chris Hedges calls the corporate state’s “empire of illusion” affects not only our ideas,
values, and beliefs but also “the social and political conditions under which we live our daily lives.”

Kari-Anne Innes’s essay, “Loie Fuller from ‘la fée lumiére’ to ‘la fée électricité’: Cybernetic Logic, Embodiment and the Electrical Woman,” contributes to several lines of research. Her study of Fuller, an innovator in dance and staging practice often seen by film scholars as simply “the serpentine dancer” in silent cinema, offers new insights into the well recognized but still entrenched tendency for women in film to be presented and seen as “electric” and thus essentially non-sentient, disembodied objects. Innes’s analysis establishes connections between early modern dance and feminist responses to turn-of-the-century modern technology. It shows that François Delsarte’s work on expression gesture is relevant not only to the history of theatre but to accounts of modern dance and cinema as well.

Innes also identifies and reckons with the reality that despite modernists’ much touted rejection of traditional aesthetic and social values, avant-garde cultural politics contributed to filmic images of women being deemed acceptable only insofar as they can be interpreted as “ideal” from the standpoint of patriarchal society. Drawing on Fuller’s own writings about the spiritualist basis for her use of lighting design, costume construction, and principles of self-expressive modern dance, Innes calls into question standard views of Fuller’s performances. Specifically, Innes denaturalizes the patriarchal bias of modernist critics who early on argued that Fuller’s performances could be valued only if they were seen as offering glimpses of a disembodied, ethereal, pure, modern woman who dissolved into “rapid movement like the spirit of the age, with fluttering garments and streaming hair.” Highlighting the role that dominant discursive practices continue to play in the way people think about aesthetic-cultural production,
Innes locates that bias in the contemporary scholarship that still sees Fuller as significant only insofar as her performances represent a female body converted into “a pure aesthetic form.”

In another look at the patriarchal underpinnings of avant-garde aesthetic and cultural values, in “A Woman’s Perspective on the Female Nude as the Site of Modernity,” Carolyn Jambard-Sweet briefly but effectively contrasts the female nudes in “traditional” modernist painting with those depicted by Suzanne Valadon, an artist and model for artists like Toulouse Lautrec. Jambard-Sweet explains that the female nude was a “significant aspect of modernists’ response to the past and their surroundings” because producing images of unclothed women was thought to signify a male artist’s “modernity,” his rejection of and alienation from conventional norms. However, as Jambard-Sweet points out, in modernist paintings, typical representations of female nudes did not make a break with the conventions and practices of patriarchy because the images were designed so that male viewers could “engage in the act of ‘seeing [women’s bodies] without being seen.’” By comparison, Valadon’s paintings do signify a rejection of conventional cultural norms; here, the images are not designed for viewers’ erotic pleasure but instead are depictions of women’s complex subjectivity and varying subjective experiences. Like Innes, Jambard-Sweet also notes that the patriarchal slant of avant-garde cultural and aesthetic values has an influence on scholarship even today; as she explains, accounts of modernism still tend to elide the fact that modernist painting includes “traditional” work informed by patriarchy and radical paintings that reject the conventions and assumptions of misogynistic representation.

Jambard-Sweet concludes with observation that Valadon’s paintings are a reminder that “power relationships implicit in mainstream art” are exposed only when people who have been marginalized begin to represent themselves and when their labor, creativity, and subjectivity has been recognized by those in power. That idea can perhaps serve as a bridge to Cynthia Stroud’s
essay, “Function is in the Eye of the Beholder: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Consumer Intent in the International Tourist Art Market,” for Stroud looks at the changing visions of art that have, for example, led fine art galleries to see “the artistic commodities of tourism as genuine works of art on the basis that they are creative expressions of a people and place.” Noting that both artisans and consumers have a complex relationship with non-traditional art, Stroud explains that for artisans, tourist art has conflicting functions. It is a product that can be exchanged for money. It is an artifact that plays into structures of power by giving tangible expression to the boundary between dominant and conquered people. It is also a symbolic and thus primarily aesthetic object that allows disenfranchised artisans to “construct, distribute, and promote a group identity.” On the consumer side, purchasing tourist art can reflect an interest in: obtaining something for practical use; giving “feel-good” economic support to impoverished people; and/or securing an object that will effectively remind the traveler of the exotic experience.

Framing her analysis of consumers’ relationship to tourist art within larger debates about art v. craft, high art v. low art, official art v. folk art, Stroud argues that for tourists, “Whatever function the object(s) may serve later, the primary function in operation at the point of purchase is probably an aesthetic one.” To sort out how a commodity like a souvenir could function as a “pure” aesthetic object, Stroud turns to the Prague School’s insights that there are no inherent aesthetic properties and thus there is no “purely aesthetic distinction between art and non-art.” Using those insights to propose that art or aesthetic function is in the eye of the individual and institutional beholder, Stroud notes that the North/First World has come to a “new awareness of the complexity of the cultural and aesthetic expression” in tourist art because practical artifacts (like pottery) have in fact become prized art objects, just as sanctioned art can have non-aesthetic value (as when paintings by modernist artists are studied to discern cultural norms and values).
Stroud’s essay echoes the articles by Innes and Jambard-Sweet by reminding us that the “exclusion perpetuated by the artistic establishment throughout much of its history: the exclusion of women, minorities, non-Western artists” has been framed as reflecting an objective assessment of artistic merit when in fact the exclusion rests on unfounded ideological positions that issue from and shore up existing structures of power. Stroud’s discussion of the complex interplay between the unstable binaries underlying definitions of art and artifact also anticipates Darin Kerr’s analysis in “Old Is the New New: Paradox and Duality in the Modernist Project.” Making a point that parallels the ideas that aesthetic function is in the eye of the individual or institutional beholder and that there are thus no fixed divisions between art and artifact, Kerr proposes that even though “the modern purports to value the new in a seemingly unmediated way, while the postmodern repurposes or reconfigures the old to achieve the appearance or ‘prestige’ of the new,” there is good reason to see that scholarship needs to be grounded in “a thorough reckoning with [modernism’s and postmodernism’s] uneasy continuities” to get beyond a “facile recognition” of the apparent rupture between modernism and postmodernism.

To flesh out that insight, Kerr notes that even the difference between traditional art and modern art is best understood, not as a clear-cut division between temporal periods, but instead as a conceptual paradox that echoes modernism’s own binaries (functional v. decorative, natural v. artificial, East v. West) and its fundamental need for the existence of “tradition” to create its version of “the new.” Kerr notes that the temporal emphasis of aesthetic avant-gardism has led distinctions among traditional, modern, and postmodern art to be seen in relation to a linear timeline. He proposes, however, that by focusing on the French conceptions of modernity that were shaped by Baudelaire and Nietzsche, modernism (especially as the term between tradition and postmodernism) can be seen as a movement that shares with traditional and postmodern art
not only a “distrust of history and progress” but also “symptomatic shadow[s]” that confound efforts to describe any one of the movements in a monolithic way.

While shifting the terms of analysis, Justin Philpot’s essay, “The Intent of Methodology: Cultural Studies, Film Studies and Challenging the Corporate Demands of the Academy,” also emphasizes the need to re-examine longstanding positions in scholarship. What emerges from Philpot’s discussion is that a division that warrants closer scrutiny is the supposed contrast between the apolitical, purely aesthetic approach entailed in appreciation of elite cultural products and the purportedly political-democratic celebrations of popular cultural products. In other words, discursive practices need rethinking because the purely aesthetic approach once confined to writing about elite culture has become ingrained in American popular culture studies. Looking at that situation from another angle, what also warrants more attention is the actual distinction between the apolitical formalism of American popular culture studies and British cultural studies’ concern with ideology and political economy. As Philpot explains, “While British theorists [are] concerned with the ways in which hegemonic power [is] expressed through systems of media, American popular culture scholars [are] teasing out the functions and meanings of certain motifs in genre fiction.” For Philpot, an embrace of “the type of analysis now familiar to cultural studies and film studies scholars” is both crucial and timely because that comprehensive, interdisciplinary approach represents a means for opposing the increasingly “corporate management ethos” of American higher education.

Framing that line of discussion in somewhat different terms, the final, editorial essay by Rosalind Sibielski entitled “Media Studies as ‘Work That Matters’: Intersections between Media Studies and Cultural Studies in the Analysis of Popular Culture,” examines the contrast between “American” and “British” approaches and proposes that with “the study of popular media . . . at
something of a crossroads,” we should recognize the value and distinguishing features of “media
analysis undertaken from [a British] cultural studies perspective.” As Sibielski explains, rather
than focus “on the pleasures of consuming” a text or on finding ways to appreciate the aesthetic
value of popular culture and low art forms, critically distanced scholarship will depend on “the
British cultural studies perspective” because it prompts us to ask not just “which media texts are
popular, but rather why it matters that they are.” Rather than insist on “the social relevance of
popular texts or practices,” British cultural studies-influenced work can lead to comprehensive
analyses because it is concerned with “examining, questioning, or critiquing [the] social impact”
of popular media texts and practices. As Sibielski explains, studies grounded in “British” critical
approaches give “ideological critique . . . a prominent place” precisely because they are designed
to serve as an “intervention in a world in which [cultural studies work will] make a difference.”

The case that Sibielski makes for studies that “move beyond celebrating the pleasures of
consuming media texts” and are media analyses that function as “political practice” in opposition
to the corporate state is consistent with the central ideas in last fall’s editorial essay, “Subversive
Fictions: A Patina of Radicalism in Corporate Media Culture,” for in both cases the call is for
academics to “stop ‘reading’ corporate messages in the hope of finding hope.” Both essays argue
that corporate media is unlikely to provide material for studies of “authentic” popular culture or
subversive expression. Critical analysis of corporate media thus remains a vital area of activity,
with alternative media becoming a possible venue for the expression of popular culture and
subversion of dominant norms. To facilitate studies of alternative media, this issue includes an
appendix that has a brief list of links to alternative media sites. Of course, directing attention to
websites encourages continued engagement with mediated forms rather than collective action in
daily life. In addition, as it stands, the appendix is likely a misstep, but one that will perhaps lead
to discussion, debate, and action.

Loie Fuller from “la fée lumiére” to “la fée éléctricité”:
Cybernetic Logic, Embodiment and the Electrical Woman

In her signature technique, Serpentine and Salome dancer Loie Fuller disappeared into a
giant flowing silk bathed in electric light. To this end, Rhonda Garelick describes the modern
dance pioneer as “proto-cinematic”: the “conversion of her physical self into a pure aesthetic
form…. dissolving…into light projections on fabric” (*Electric Salome* 8). For Garelick, Fuller’s
disembodiment prefigures film and, it can be argued, women in cinema as well, for the
individualized physical self dissolves into a “pure [idealized] aesthetic form” on the silken or
silver screen. Garelick’s observation echoes French Symbolist Stephané Mallarmé’s idealization of the performer in general and Fuller specifically as a “disembodied ‘idea’” (Garelick Electric Salome 11). Their perspective positions Fuller as a technological or “electric” entity. In fact, Garelick writes, “so long as Fuller kept her somewhat graceless self out of sight, and centered her performance in her technological genius, she dazzled her crowds, succeeding as more of an Electric Salome than a biblical one” (Garelick Electric Salome 6). Yet the idea that Fuller had a “graceless self” is not self-evident but instead is best understood as a long standing critical emphasis on disembodiment that reflects the era’s fears and fantasies of the mechanized body and the subsequent projection of these fears on the “electrical” woman.

Anxiety over the electrical or “technologized body” has dominated scholarship to the extent that Garelick believes the “topic has received more than enough critical attention” (Electric Salome 139). This is not to say that Garelick ignores this theme in her work or her assessment of Fuller, but acknowledges its predominance. Taking a different approach, other scholars such as Ann Cooper Albright are now at work to recuperate Fuller’s bodiliness to consider her in association with other early modern dancers. A similar recuperation in regard to film might be to consider Fuller’s work through a “cybernetic” versus “electric” logic. Such logic serves neither to deny the technological aspects nor the embodiment of Fuller’s work, but accounts for both. In her article “The Cybernetic Logic of the Lumière Actualities, 1895-1897,” Cynthia Baron observes a counter response in early film to the fear of the machine’s dominance over the human body. In the Lumière actualities of everyday scenes, leisure activities and popular entertainments, human bodies interact with technology, but “remain unchanged and in control” (Baron 178). The films’ “cybernetic bodies” advance the logic that “even in the face of radical technological change, human life [will] remain the center of the experienced world, and
‘real’ human beings [will] not be displaced or threatened by mechanized images” (Baron 174). Fuller can be seen as one of Lumière’s cybernetic bodies in that they produced a Fuller-inspired “folioscope” of the Serpentine Dance in 1897 (Albright 188). In the demonstration of Fuller’s dance, the performer remains at the center of the experience and in mastery of the technology. The mechanized image does not threaten the dancer’s body, and the dancer’s body controls the mechanized image. Given the centrality of the body in Fuller’s technique, it is curious that what critics like Garelick find most successful or choose to emphasize in her performances is that the dancer’s body is “displaced” or “kept out of sight.” Thus, I would join scholars like Albright in the argument that it is the criticism and not the technology of the Serpentine Dance that threatens the human body, suggesting that this view is due in large part to Fuller’s gender and society’s fear not only of the machine, but of female embodiment as well. In this essay, I will use “cybernetic logic” to explore tensions between embodiment and disembodiment in the critical reception of Fuller, as well as the construction of the Electrical Woman as a denial of female embodiment. This inquiry is useful, for insofar as Fuller is understood as the progenitor of cinema, that perspective colors how women have continued to be viewed on the screen.

Disembodiment and misogyny are closely related in cybernetic logic’s response to fin de siècle fears. Lee Quinby explains that “the desire of final freedom from bodily constraint is a gender-inflicted dream with a two thousand year history [and the] denial of embodiment has been a heterosexist obsession that defines itself oppositionally to women’s bodily excess and lesbian and gay sexuality” (qtd. in Baron 170). That denial can also be applied to Fuller’s work. By many critical accounts, the technological aspects of Fuller’s performances freed her from the “constraint” of a “graceless” body said to have been too “overweight,” “visibly sweating” (Garelick Electric Salome 5, 96) and lesbian for that of a dancer. Fuller’s reputation as “fat”
extends from her often quoted memoirs in which she recounts her physical appearance as disappointing a young fan (Fuller 141-142) to Jean Cocteau’s equally cited 1900 World’s Fair recollection of her as “a fat, rather ugly American woman with glasses” who nonetheless should be “salute[d]” as a “phantom of an era” in the “maneuvering her veils” (qtd. in Electric Salome 78). Coincidentally, it is after the fair that Fuller’s moniker changed from “la fée lumière” to “la fée électrique” (Garelick Electric Salome 79). Using the play on words, I argue that Fuller began to be seen not through the embodied cybernetic logic of the Lumière brothers, but through the disembodied “electric” logic of her fans and critics.

According to Albright it is the “fuller”-figured image from the dancer’s late career that has been exploited by scholars at the exclusion of Fuller’s “cute and ‘fetching’” build in her prime (121). Fuller’s presumably younger lighter and more graceful body is often denied while her older, plumper, “electric” body is “saluted” only when hidden from view. Furthermore, although Fuller’s lesbianism does not readily figure in the assessment of her dancing, I include it here as one of the “excesses” that Quinby asserts that “heterosexist obsession” tries to restrain. Albright notes that “the combination of typically masculine interest in electricity…and the typically feminized vocation of performing on public stages (especially as a dancer)….cancelled one another out to render [Fuller] neuter – or lesbian” (121). In criticism, if not in performance, the technical or “electrical” aspects of Fuller’s work, in which her body literally disappeared into silk, concealed these bodily “excesses” leaving only the disembodied idea(l) of a woman. Cybernetic logic, which allows for embodiment in relation to technology, therefore, might be a better way in which to view and discuss Fuller’s performances.

In order to understand Fuller through a cybernetic logic, it is useful to explore the embodied nature of her work as a modern dancer. Garelick observes that the conflicting views of
Fuller as technological and embodied seldom meet in discussions on Fuller. As she explains, Fuller’s “‘elaborate production values,’ [have] always seemed somehow incommensurable with her role as a ‘modern dance pioneer’” (Garelick Rising Star 101). Albright, in turn, lays some of the responsibility on Garelick writing, “According to Garelick, ‘[Fuller] had turned herself into an illusion-producing machine, devoid of any apparently bodily characteristics’” (Garelick Rising Star qtd. in Albright 181). However, to be fair, in her later book Electric Salome, Garelick clarifies her opinion saying that “rather than reject[ing] bodily or physical movement outright, Fuller in fact created a fusion of ‘personal kinetics’ and elaborate production values’” (162). This last statement seems to approach Albright’s “kinesthetically expressive” descriptions of Fuller, as well as Baron’s cybernetic logic, which values the expressivity the human body through and with technology.

These views are useful because modern dancers, predominantly women, in the late nineteenth century were avidly engaged in the quest for embodiment. Vanessa Toulmin and Simon Popple argue that the body “suffered” a “crisis” upon the introduction of technology, primarily that “technologies…threatened to displace, replace, or even erase the human body whenever the vehicle of technology was made to substitute for the tenor of the body” (2). This statement is similar to Baron’s articulation of the teleological fear of “‘real’ human beings” being “displaced or threatened by mechanized images” (174). Like Baron, Toulmin posits a response from the artistic community, not through cybernetic logic but through S.S. Curry’s “theory of ‘expression’” and the “expressive culture movement.” According to Toulmin and Popple, this movement “held that these new technologies [film, phonograph.] alienated human beings from their natural condition, throwing the body’s rhythms out of alignment with the spiritual forces of the universe” (5). Embodiment, or “recalibrat[ing] their body’s natural rhythms” would “counter
the alienating conditions of modern life” (5). It is significant that in formulating his theories, Curry borrows from Francois Delsarte who greatly influenced modern dance, including “pioneers” Ted Shawn, Isadora Duncan, and Ruth St. Denis (Schwartz 72).

Delsarte proposes an intricate system to realign the body and soul. In his address to the Philotechnic Society of Paris, published posthumously in 1887, he articulates what would become known as his “law of correspondence.” As he explains, “To each spiritual function responds a function of the body; to each grand function of the body corresponds a spiritual act” (Delsarte 71). Shawn, Duncan and St. Denis are largely credited with applying Delsarte’s physical/spiritual concepts to modern dance. Hillel Schwartz describes the result as a “new kinaesthetic” which expresses “the loving accommodation of the force of gravity, fluid movement flowing out of the body center, freedom of invention, and natural transitions through many fully expressive positions” (73). Within this new kinaesthetic mechanization of the body is not feared, but embraced. Schwartz describes the kinaesthetic’s defining movement of “torque” as inspired by the spiral of a Wilbur Wright plane. Embodying the torque of an aircraft, the dancer is “bound link by vertebral link to the earth as to the heavens” (Schwartz 75). Like the “cybernetic body,” this “new kinaesthetic” is a response to mechanization. Its embodiment is defined as full integration of the mechanical, corporeal, and spiritual with the human body at the center and in control.

Although there is no formal connection between Fuller and Delsarte, the language of the “new kinesthetic” is evident in Fuller’s works and writings. Albright describes Fuller as “prefigur[ing] Schwartz’s notion of a ‘new kinaesthetic.’… Certainly as the serpentine dance evolved from its premiere in 1892 to its more elaborate manifestations…Fuller had to use more and more torque to send her silks rising farther into the space around her” (31). Albright traces
the vocabulary of torque to Fuller’s own description of her creative method in *Fifteen Years of a Dancer’s Life*. I have chosen an excerpt that I think best evokes Fuller’s physical and spiritual expression of torque:

Gently, almost religiously, I set the silk in motion…. Finally, I reached a point where each movement of the body was expressed in silk…. I obtained a spiral effect by holding my arms aloft while I kept whirling to right and then to left, and I continued this until the spiral design was established. Head, hands, and feet followed the evolutions of the body and the robe. (33-34)

In this passage, Fuller’s intent to integrate body, spirit and technique is made clear. She uses the silk as an extension of, versus a detachment from, her body. It can be seen that, in her own words, she perceived her work as consistent with what Schwartz observes as the “new kinesthetic.” Fuller’s writing comes very close to parroting, either consciously or unconsciously, Delsarte himself. In her own law of correspondence, she writes: “the body expresses the emotion it has received from the mind. The mind serves as a medium and causes these sensations to be caught up by the body….As a matter of fact, motion has been the starting point of all effort of self-expression and it’s faithful to nature” (Fuller 71-72).

This idea of natural self-expression stands in stark contrast to the Electrical Woman described in commentary on Loie Fuller. Although Fuller’s “Serpentine Dance” had Spiritualist roots, conventional interpretations have denied her the embodiment associated with Delsarte and the expressive culture movement and overlooked the fact that, according to critic Giovanni Lista, “Fuller was raised within a Spiritualist family and [that] mesmerism and mediumistic phenomena were a key inspiration for her art” (Gunning 40). Even Albright, in her comments regarding Lista’s praise of a pictorial representation of Fuller’s dance, calls his “spiritual overtones…over
the top” (41). It is not unlikely, however, that Fuller’s original intent was embodiment and spiritual expression. This holds in keeping with Jean Lorraine’s 1893 assessment of her performance as “the beautiful girl who in her floating filmy draperies, swirls endlessly around in an ecstasy induced by divine revelations” (qtd. in Huisman and Dortu 115). Lorraine’s opinion, however, would change as critical reception in male circles redefined the nature of her dance.

If the Serpentine was a dance of embodiment, and in particular spiritual and female embodiment, this idea was eventually lost. In “The Body in Motion,” Nancy Mowll Mathews describes Fuller’s reception among critics as a symbol of the “perfected modern woman,” which critic Eugen Wolff defined in 1888, although not in direct reference to Fuller, as “an experienced but pure woman, in rapid movement like the spirit of the age, with fluttering garments and streaming hair” (qtd. in Mathews 79). Then and now, associating Fuller with “fluttering garments and streaming hair” distances her performance from embodiment of self. Mathews, for instance, goes on to associate Fuller with the “electrical woman” popular in fin-de-siècle French literature. Such a character was featured in Auguste de Villiers De l’Isle-Adam, L’Eve Future (1884, 1886), in which a “supernatural being” animates an “electric woman.” Mathews suggests, “The resulting creature is not a woman ‘but an angel … more than reality, an ideal’” (82 quoting the novel). By association, Fuller, too, becomes disembodied, no longer a “real” corporeal and spiritual body, but a symbol of “an electric woman” falling somewhere between pure “angel” and the “experienced” modern ideal.

On this continuum, Fuller represents not only the L’Eve, but Salome whom she performed in 1895 at the Comédie Parisienne and in 1907 at Théatre de Arts (Albright 115). Salome was a key image within the Symbolist movement, from which Fuller was also drawing attention. Mallarmé, who would become enthralled by Fuller, described his idea of a danseuse as
“always a symbol, never a person … not a girl, but rather a metaphor” (qtd. in Gunning 29).  
Ironically, it was Fuller’s breach of this principle that brought negative reviews of her Salome dance for which she is also most famous. In this dance, the now aging performer portrayed herself not as an abstract lily or butterfly, but the biblical character of Salome. Perhaps more than in previous performances, Fuller appeared as a bodied person rather than as a symbol. Garelick notes that Fuller’s performances drew criticism because, “Instead of disappearing into enormous floating lengths of fabric in every scene, as Salome, Fuller frequently permitted spectators to see her actual body dancing…. ‘Seen up close by the public,’ wrote one review, ‘in a specific setting with defined action, [Fuller] loses all charm and mystery’” (Garelick Electric Salome 94). Garelick goes on to suggest that reviews of the 1907 performance, in which Fuller “allowed a brief glimpse of herself naked,” were so caustic that she no longer allowed her body to be revealed in performance (Garelick Electric Salome 93).  
Although Albright provides equally positive reviews of Salome, including contemporary readings of the dance as an “unveiling” of Fuller’s femininity and lesbianism, it is clear from Garelick’s account that some critics were uncomfortable with the “excesses” of Fuller’s body and sexuality.  
  
Changing opinions of Fuller reveal the extent of the denial of her embodiment. Gunning notes that the “beautiful girl” once said to be “induced by divine revelations,” subsequently became for Jean Lorraine “a Salome for Yankee drunkards” and for Mallarmé, although intended as a compliment, an “industrial art” (qtd. in Gunning 30). As Fuller’s technological presence became valued over her bodily presence, the teleological fear that “human bodies would be replaced by machines” (Baron 169) became a reality projected onto Fuller’s shimmering drapery, later to become the silver screen. Replicated and burlesqued by imitators and shown in turn-of-the-century film houses, the electric woman was a mechanically reproduced embodiment of this
fear. This is not to suggest that Fuller saw her dance as such. On the contrary, her intent may have been to create an accessible, meaningful, spiritual, and embodied if not also technological art form. I agree with Gunning when he quotes Fuller as describing her working class “delicatessen” audience as “feel[ing]” her meaning (emphasis his Gunning 31). He also references Camille Mauclair’s Symbolist novel Le soleil des morts, taking Fuller as its inspiration, in which the character states, “this art of lines and shapes is accessible from the first view, why shouldn’t I reveal myself through it?” (qtd. in Gunning 31). For Gunning, this presents “a truly utopian vision of a modern art form, highly technological, not only depending on the new energy of electricity, but seeming to visualize this invisible energy … evoking rather than portraying images and forms and making each manifestation or shape dissolve harmoniously into each other” (31). This vision is evocative of the “new kinaesthetic” of embodiment in modern dance: the integration of the spiritual, corporeal, and mechanical; the process of self-realization or revelation; and “natural transitions” of “fully expressive” movement (Schwartz 73-77). It is necessary to recognize, however, that these are Mauclair and Gunning’s words to describe Fuller. Gunning does not allow Fuller to fully speak for herself, qualifying her words by saying that she possessed “a somewhat simpler form of aesthetic idealism” and that “if Fuller’s own critical vocabulary was unsophisticated, this does not indicate that her effect on the (chiefly male) artists of the Parisian avant-garde was unwitting” (29). Gunning dismisses Fuller’s words as “unsophisticated,” perhaps because he does not recognize her cybernetic and embodied, versus electric, logic. Because Fuller was “witting” and willing to capitalize on the avant-garde perception of her does not mean that she was in full agreement or that her “simpler” idealism was somehow lesser than her critics’ aesthetics. Gunning’s summation of the performer is indicative of the larger issue at hand, Fuller is denied the
embodiment of even her own words by having meaning “projected” onto them by critics from a “chiefly male” perspective.

Returning to Quinby, Mallarmé’s desire to “free” Fuller from “bodily constraint” can be viewed as a “denial of embodiment” and is symptomatic of a “heterosexist obsession.” Gunning offers that Fuller’s dance was an “encounter between the male gaze and the female body within a crisis of representation lodged midway between pornography and sublimation. The role of Fuller’s female body was multiple and…unstable” (32). The multiplicity and instability of Fuller’s female body, or what Quinby might classify as “women’s bodily excess,” provoked her disembodiment and subsequent projection by male critics. Gunning explains that it is this projection of “female body in cinema” that Annette Michelson claims is “the fantasmic ground of cinema itself” (qtd. in Gunning 32). Loie Fuller, as the electrical woman, represented a “gender-inflicted dream” and laid the groundwork for female representation on the screen.

As proto-cinematic, Loie Fuller became a mechanical representation and electric projection of male teleological fear. The question may still be asked how “electric” understandings of Fuller continue to reinscribe this image of woman on the screen. Certainly it is not difficult to find examples of how feminine “excesses” such as age, weight, and sexuality are kept, to borrow a phrase from Garelick, “under wraps.” Albright has her own opinion of how to deal with these excesses. Following the logic of Luce Irigaray’s *jouissance* and “exuberant excess,” she writes, “I am convinced that it is precisely in the midst of the abundance of shapes, the phantasmagoric excess of imaging in Fuller’s work that we can grasp the radical potential of her dancing body to disrupt both traditional representations of dancing women and the heterosexist norms embedded in watching those performances” (47). She continues that this
disruption depends on creating performances and images that compel the audience to view the dancer as an “expressive subject” versus or in addition to an “erotic object” (49).

Additionally, it may be asked how such a reconsideration of Fuller could lead to a different way of viewing, not only Fuller as a predecessor of film, but of women on the screen in general. I am not the first to consider such questions. For instance, both Albright and Garelick gesture toward Felicia McCarren’s *Dancing Machines: Choreographies of the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* for a discussion on how dance and film have worked together to shape the representation of women in film, as well as the disciplines’ possibility of future “collaboration.” According to McCarren, “In spite of mainstream film’s tendency to fetishize the female figure, some collaborations between cinema and dance would create a dancing subject rather than a dancing object, a movement of image rather than a simple image of movement” (61). The key seems to lie in recovering woman as an expressive, even if this includes “excessive,” subject. With this essay, I hope to have illustrated how criticisms of Fuller have contributed to the image of the electric and cinematic woman as a disembodied object and how, in “collaboration” with scholars such as Baron, Schwartz, McCarren and Albright, a recuperation of the dancer as an embodied subject may, in turn, serve to recuperate the embodied and cybernetic logics of women on the screen.
Notes

1. For Garelick’s exploration of the “technologized body” in ballet and its resonance in Fuller’s technique, see Garelick Electric Salome 139-144.

2. See Albright 145-179.

3. See “Lumiére Brothers- The Serpentine Dance c. 1899” (date discrepancy) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UkT54BetFBI

4. For more information about Delsarte’s influences in popular culture and dance, as well as the probable influence of Delsartean “physical culture” on Fuller, see Coffman.

5. Albright similarly discusses Schwartz and the “new kinesthetic” in relation to Fuller’s work, see 30-31. For a detailed analysis of Fuller’s use of torque in the Serpentine Dance, see Albright 1-49.

6. See Lista 44, 75.

7. This Mallarmé quote appears in most scholarship on Fuller. Albright points to an alternate reading posited by Julie Ann Townsend in which “In Mallarmé’s model, art would ideally include the material body and the metaphysical Idée” (qtd. in Albright 45). Albright contends, however, that because of interpretations to the contrary we are “left … a legacy of ignoring Fuller’s corporeality and the emotional ‘impressions’ she wished to convey” (39). See Townsend 78-79.

8. For reviews and more information, Garelick directs the reader to “‘Review for Salome,’ Fémina, 15 November 1907, Collection Rondel; Giovanni Lista, Danseuse, 458; Jules Clarétie, “La Tragédie de Salomé,” Le Temps, 8 Nov. 1907; also Harris, “Loie Fuller: The Myth, the Woman and the Artist,” 27; and unidentified press clippings NYPLPA, Robinson Locke Collection” (93).

9. See Albright 115-143.

10. The distinction between “expressive subject” and “erotic object” is borrowed from Susan Manning 163.

11. See Albright 181-205 and McCarren 43-63.
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Delsarte, Francois. “Address of Francois Delsarte Before The Philotechnic Society of Paris.”


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A Woman’s Perspective on the Female Nude as the Site of Modernity

Carolyn Jambard-Sweet

Suzanne Valadon (1865-1938), a female artist and nude model featured in the modernist works of Henri de Toulouse Lautrec, Pierre Auguste Renoir, and others, makes her an interesting case study when considering modernist male artists’ representations of the female nude and when reflecting on accounts of the modernist art movement. For example, Valadon’s dual role as artist and model falls outside the framework of Pam Meecham and Julie Sheldon’s analysis in Modern Art: A Critical Introduction. While their chapter on “The Female Nude as the Site of Modernity” is an enlightening discussion of the female nude’s place in representations of modernity, the authors defer a discussion of women artists to the section on post-modernism. Importantly, that decision reflects the tradition of omitting women artists from discussions of modernist art. Such an omission raises the question of whether women artists have been omitted from the history of modern art for the simple fact that they did not exist in a great enough quantity or quality to be acknowledged, or whether they have been so consistently suppressed by the patriarchal art world that they are still not seen as significant enough to warrant a mention in the history of modernist art. In response to that question, I would propose that there were women painters whose work can and should be seen as an integral part of art in the modernist period. This essay looks at a few paintings by and of Suzanne Valadon to begin illuminating the radical, oppositional representation practices used by female artists in the modernist art movement.

Paintings of female nudes were a particularly significant aspect of modernists’ response to the past and their surroundings. As Meecham and Sheldon explain, “The nude became, on one level, deeply implicated in the politics of representation and, on another level, a metaphor for the modern artist’s own sense of alienation” (85). One could argue that this complex nexus of
associations was especially relevant to Valadon as she explored the use of the female nude in art and struggled for recognition in the patriarchal art world of the early twentieth century. Because she was an integral part of modernist art as a female nude model and a female artist largely dismissed in accounts of that movement, Valadon’s nudes complicate assessments of that male-centered modernist art movement.

**Valadon as Model**

The examination of a female artist/model’s efforts to function against the odds to gain acceptance reveals Valadon’s somewhat paradoxical perspective. As Meecham and Sheldon notes, even as a model Valadon’s role is multidimensional for “The female sitter fulfills a triple role as model, mistress and muse but, in addition she becomes an important sign of the male artist’s modernity” (85). In Renoir’s *Bather Arranging her Hair* (1885) (figure 1), Valadon sits in an idyllic impressionistic landscape dominated by Renoir’s beloved pastels. Her back is towards the viewer, thus obscuring her face and allowing the (male) audience to function comfortably as the voyeur. Renoir’s choice to position Valadon in this way allows (male) viewers to guiltlessly engage in the act of “seeing without being seen” (Meecham and Sheldon, 96). Valadon is partially disrobed as her chemise rests across her thighs, revealing her buttocks yet avoiding exposure of her genitals. The chemise appears as if at any moment it could fall to the ground, exposing the model in a complete state of vulnerability. Though (male) viewers can assume that the model is unaware of their presence, Valadon seems to be frozen in mid strip-tease, thus denying the
audience total access to her coveted body. The conventions of this work are typical of representations of nudes within the realm of the modernist art movement.

As a model for Renoir’s painting, Valadon had very little control over her representation. When she does have full creative control, the results are quite different. In her *Nude Self Portrait* (1924) (figure 2), Valadon stares out at the audience, her gaze, like that of the *Mona Lisa* seems to lock onto the viewer’s gaze. This gives the work a confrontational aura. In addition, her body has a corporality that evades sexuality. Her breasts and nipples are obliterated by broad brushstrokes. Her skin exudes not the soft milky texture of Renoir’s representation but the severe coarseness of the bristles of a brush or perhaps the edge of a palate knife. Like Manet’s *Olympia* (1863), Valadon refuses to be sexualized as she gazes out of the canvas, her thickly rendered eyebrows raised in sceptical contemplation. Her hair, an attribute often considered symbolic of a woman’s sexuality has been depicted not as long and flowing, but rather severely pulled back and awkwardly plastered to her forehead. She confronts the viewer not only with her alert eyes, but with the almost violent corporality of her discolored and misshapen flesh. This is not a body to be coveted; the female nude in this case acknowledges the viewer’s presence and, by returning the gaze, denies her audience the ability to function as voyeurs.

There is also very little depth in the work and the figure dominates the foreground of this shallow composition. To the right of Valadon, the background is a mass of multicolored brushstrokes. To the left there is a bowl of fruit sitting on a crudely drawn table. This still life has been pushed into the background by Valadon’s bulky, rectilinear presence and painted

![Figure 2: Nude Self Portrait](image-url)
haphazardly, as if an afterthought. The bowl of fruit, as simple as it may seem, can be interpreted in several ways. Valadon could be commenting on the conventional use of fruit as a symbol of fertility in portraits of women. Making a statement as a modernist artist, Valadon might also be metaphorically forcing academic traditions of fine art into the background. Such interpretations may be reaching beyond all possible knowledge of the artist’s intent. Yet if we see Valadon as representing a first wave of modernist, feminist painters, it is possible to imagine the artist commenting on traditional representations of women.

Valadon’s Gaze

It is clear that whereas in Renoir’s idyllic nude Valadon was contained in an ethereal landscape, Valadon’s nude self portrait has a presence that is neither innocent nor a “carrier of overwhelmingly male signs” (Meecham and Sheldon, 88). Interestingly, when Valadon depicts other female nudes, the figures’ subjectivity and presence is somewhat different from that suggested by her nude self portrait. For example, Valadon’s *Reclining Nude* (1928) (figure 3) resembles the artist’s self portrait in that the figure acknowledges the viewer’s presence. However, rather than face the viewer with a confrontational stare, the model acknowledges the audience with a gaze that suggests that she is reluctantly showing her stripped body. The figure is clearly conscious of her nakedness and is someone that critic Kenneth Clark would likely describe as “huddled and defenseless” rather than “balanced and confident” (quoted in Meecham and Sheldon, 87). In this painting, Valadon’s nude conceals her genitals through the placement of her legs, partly obscuring her breasts with her left arm as
she tensely grips a stark piece of white drapery with her right hand. The woman appears extremely uncomfortable about posing this way. The unease depicted here is seldom seen in the female nudes by modernist male artists.

In *Two Bathers* (1923) (figure 4), Valadon’s depiction of women presents the audience with yet another form of presence and subjective experience. Here the women seem far more nude than naked. The two figures are disinterested in their audience. However, instead of giving viewers the impression that one has access to a voyeuristic eroticization of flesh, Valadon makes them feel like they have stumbled upon a private, thoughtful exchange between the two women. While voyeurism is certainly an option here, as the gaze of the (male) viewer is perpetuated and left unreturned, the painting creates a barricade to erotic access. The women do not seem poised to engage in sex or sensual activity. Instead, the dark-haired woman in the foreground gazes into space as if lost in thought while the red-haired figure in the background looks forward as if reflecting on the thoughts that are occupying her companion’s minds. The concern that the red-haired woman feels for her companion’s emotional well being is conveyed through the gentle gesture of braiding the other woman’s hair. This simple, caring, essentially distracted gesture de-eroticizes the work and offers a glimpse of female companionship. Rather than presenting the audience with objectified images of women’s sexuality, in Valadon’s work, the figures are humanized by their interaction with one another in much the same way the *Reclining Nude* is humanized by her unease. Compositionally, Valadon uses elements of modernism present in the work of her male counterparts: the draperies and patterning give the work the kind of “oriental”

![Figure 4: Two Bathers](image-url)
or “primitive” feel one might find in paintings by Kirchner or Matisse from this period. There is, however, is a significant difference between the disengaged nudes in painting by male modernists and the sentient, self conscious, and aware female nudes represented by Valadon.

Although Valadon’s work needs further investigation to support definitive conclusions, this short analysis indicates that Valadon’s nudes are both relevant to the history of modernism and groundbreaking in their embodiment of the female perspective. The examples also suggest that Valadon’s female nudes are as radical as the ones created by male modernists and are a reminder that “it is not until traditionally marginalised groups represent themselves that their practice exposes the power relationships implicit in mainstream art” (Meecham and Sheldon, 93).

Selected Bibliography


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Function is in the Eye of the Beholder: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Consumer Intent in the International Tourist Art Market

Cynthia Stroud

The scent is almost overwhelming: wood and earth and something so sweet it is almost cloying, but not quite. Above all it is alien, exotic, decadent. But there is also something familiar.

“Sandalwood.”

“But the darker pieces?”

“Evening sandalwood.” He is patient to a fault. His demeanor is practiced, controlled. His livelihood depends on it.

Sandalwood. I am momentarily taken by a long-ago sense-memory of patchouli and incense and the bass player with long, black curls and intensely blue eyes, before returning to the task at hand:

“How much?”

“1,000 rupees.”

“What do you think?”

“You know that would cost a fortune at home, but you’re supposed to haggle, right?”

“700 rupees.”

“OK, sure, yeah.”
I have obviously overpaid, because the transaction is over far too quickly. But even many years later, when I open the case the scent of sandalwood, much diffused but still detectable, greets me. I lift each piece from the satin and marvel at the skill of the carver: the impossibly looped curves atop the bishops, the intricate manes on each knight. But the greatest pleasure comes from the tiny pawns, each a perfect replica of the stupas that dot the landscape where I stopped to watch the faithful pray and leave tokens, but didn’t dare pray myself, unwilling to profane the sacred spaces with my uncertainty.

I do not play chess. But I do have a beautiful, hand-carved chess set purchased from a street bazaar in Kathmandu, Nepal. It is part of a large collection of what has variously been referred to as folk art, traditional art, craft, or handicraft by those who have visited my home: a Guatemalan doll-wreath, a Tibetan yak bone necklace, a Chinese painted scroll, a Nepali ink-block-and-batik fabric with a Mandala-motif. The fabric was originally intended for use as a tablecloth but was so beautifully made that I had it framed as a wall-sized piece. It always draws more interest than anything else in my home; however, its original function was certainly not purely aesthetic. It is lovely, but it is a tablecloth. Some of the pieces in my collection were purchased from street vendors and some in galleries, a few from importers in the U.S., but most in (or near, in the case of Tibet) the lands where they were produced.

Most of these pieces were created to meet the demands of the (primarily) international tourism industry. In “The Social Sources of Authenticity in Global Handicraft Markets,” Frederick Wherry explains that tourist arts “are bought by travelers visiting exotic locations or by individuals in search of objects that represent (from the consumer’s point of view) a particular ethnic group or a specific cultural tradition” (6). Tourist art also often carries a signification of a societal power imbalance. In his introduction to Ethnic and Tourist Arts, Nelson H. H. Graburn
uses the term “tourist arts” to refer to art objects produced for external consumption by dominated peoples “[i]n stratified societies that consist of dominant and conquered strata” (4-5). Graburn explains that these art objects “have often been despised by connoisseurs as unimportant” but, in fact, they are “important in presenting to the outside world an ethnic image that must be maintained and projected as part of the all-important boundary-defining system” within the larger group (5). While tourist art serves a distinct economic function for the artisans who produce it, it also serves as a way for the artisans to construct, distribute, and promote a group identity with which they wish to be identified within their larger society.

The function of tourist art for its consumers is equally complex. Objects might be purchased for presentation as gifts, like the beautifully carved chopsticks my mother bought me on a business trip in China. Tourists may enjoy the knowledge (real or projected) that they are helping to maintain the cultural traditions and group cohesion of oppressed or dominated peoples through their purchases. Gender and women’s studies professor, Caren Kaplan, called this sort of impulse “feel-good capitalism and warm, fuzzy geopolitics” in reference to shopping at the retail chain, The Body Shop, which markets and promotes goods acquired through fair-trade with small farmers, traditional craftspeople, and rural cooperatives around the world (59). If I return to my chess set, it was only recently that I discovered the quick calculations I had done on the street all those years ago had been off, and I had paid far less than I actually thought. Doing the currency conversion in my head, I thought I was paying just under thirty dollars. While fact-checking for this paper, I discovered that one US dollar was worth 51.01 Nepalese rupees during the time I was travelling in 1995 (“Daily Exchange Rates”). I actually paid less than fifteen dollars for the set. According to the Nepal Living Standard Survey, the per capita income in 1995/96 was 7,690 rupees (cited in Bhatt and Sharma 26). The 700 rupees I paid for the chess set
was more than a month’s earnings for the average Nepali. Had I calculated the price correctly at the time, I might have been less inclined to negotiate, despite the fact that this is a customary practice and labeled prices reflect the assumption that buyers will do so. On the same trip, I had been happy to pay full price for hand-made stationery, calendars, journals, and other paper products because I knew they were made by a women’s cooperative and the money was intended to help lift these women out of poverty. I suspect there is something to Caplan’s “feel-good capitalism and warm, fuzzy geopolitics.” And after all, the extraordinary skill of the carver and the great pleasure the chess set has brought me are surely worth more than fifteen dollars.

The complexities of the object’s function for the consumer do not stop with practical use and economic support of subjugated peoples, however. In working to tease out the difference between gallery art and tourist art, David L. Hume suggests that “For the art gallery, the formal and aesthetic qualities of the object are paramount. Tourist art and souvenirs, however, rest somewhere in between, in that it is the aesthetic and decorative quality of the object that attracts the tourist’s eye, while the object’s ability to refer to the experienced site and culture is of equal importance” (56). Therefore, tourist art serves a metonymic function, evoking the journey or event when the tourist returns home. However, I would argue that this metonymic function is a later consequence of the purchase and not the initial reason for the purchase. While I stood in a Caribbean handicraft market selecting a woven reed mat, I was not trying to choose the one which would best help me remember the hot sun and the cold rum punch that day. I was not trying to select the one which would best invoke the complete sensory overload of visiting a nude beach the day before. I was trying to decide which one I liked the best. In the moment of the consumer transaction, one buys tourist art because it is aesthetically pleasing. Even while practicing “feel-good capitalism and warm, fuzzy geopolitics,” the tourist has a choice between
many objects, and presumably purchases the one(s) he or she likes best. Whatever function the
object(s) may serve later, the primary function in operation at the point of purchase is probably
an aesthetic one.

“Aesthetic function” was an idea addressed by Jan Mukařovský, a Czech theorist
associated with the Prague Linguistic Circle. As Cynthia Baron and Sharon Marie Carnicke note
in their book *Reframing Screen Performance,* “The Prague Linguistic Circle (1926-48) was a
loose association of Czech, Russian, German, and British scholars with an interest in linguistics,
aesthetics, dramatic art, film, literature, ethnography, and musicology” (90). In Mark E. Suino’s
afterword to *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts* by Mukařovský, Suino strives
to explain Mukařovský’s use of the term “aesthetic function.” Suino states:

If the aesthetic function dominates the other functions it isolates an event or
object from their extra-aesthetic surroundings, focuses the perceiver’s attention on
them, and (at least potentially) gives pleasure to the perceiver. In effect
dominance of the aesthetic function is, for Mukařovský, synonymous with the
definition of art. (97)

In Mukařovský’s terms, the consumer who is concerned primarily with aesthetic function would
be purchasing an art object. The term “tourist art” becomes irrelevant at the moment of selection
and purchase, because the aesthetic function dominates, potentially giving pleasure to the
perceiver.

This line of thinking about aesthetic function is furthered in Michael L. Quinn’s *The
Semiotic Stage.* Quinn notes:

In the first place, there is no longer in Mukařovský’s theory any purely aesthetic
distinction between art and non-art. The function of a sign may change through
time, so that an artistic artifact may come to be valued for other non-aesthetic functions. The aesthetic function may pertain to any kind of object or activity, and may exist in either a dominant or subordinate role. (26)

If Mukařovský’s theory does not make “any purely aesthetic distinction between art and non-art,” and “an artistic artifact may come to be valued for other non-aesthetic functions,” this begs the question of whether the reverse is also possible. Can an object which is valued for, say practical function, come to be valued as an artistic artifact? This is certainly the case with pre-Columbian pottery, for example, which was created for practical use, but later became so prized by collectors that a thriving black market appeared through which it could be smuggled.

Where does this leave craft and other works not traditionally defined as “art”? It would appear that Mukařovský, at least, would allow them all under the same tent, as long as the aesthetic function was dominant for a given culture, society, and/or individual. There is already no “purely aesthetic distinction between art and non-art.” The artisan who created my jade chopsticks and the tiny jade swans used as chopstick stands was clearly hoping to sell them to tourists, but when I chose to display them in a shadowbox with several other examples of chopsticks from the same region of China, some of jade, some of porcelain, and some of bone, along with ink-and-paper works from other nearby artists, they lost all practical function and became purely aesthetic objects. Much like my late mother-in-law’s hand-painted china, for which I modified a glass-front bookcase to include custom lighting, I simply found the chopsticks too delicate for everyday use and too beautiful to hide in a cabinet or drawer.

We wrestle with questions of high- and low- art, of folk art and traditional art, of art vs. craft, but perhaps Mukařovský’s notion of aesthetic function can provide us with a way of thinking about this issue which might avoid some of the traps of exclusion perpetuated by the
artistic establishment throughout much of its history: exclusion of the work of women, minorities, non-Western artists, etc.\textsuperscript{1} In fact, it seems that some recent scholarship on tourist art is beginning to move in this direction already, and that the fine art establishment has been taking note. In his 2009 article, David L. Hume reports:

The recent recognition of souvenired objects within museum collections and the increasing inclusion of tourist art in fine art galleries suggest one or two things. On the one hand, it suggests that the repetitive production entailed in the making of souvenirs and the need to overcome conditions of poverty does not necessarily result in a reduction of aesthetic standards. On the other hand, it may equally suggest that fine art galleries have begun to embrace the artistic commodities of tourism as genuine works of art on the basis that they are creative expressions a people and place. (69)

The stigma attached to objects which are made with an economic interest in mind is falling away with the new awareness of the complexity of the cultural and aesthetic expression of those objects. I suspect that there is another reason for the embrace of tourist art that has little to do with art and much to do with commerce. As galleries have discovered the \textit{economic} function served by embracing this large and lucrative market, art historians and critics have been compelled to take a closer look at the aesthetic features of what had once been dismissed as kitsch.

Given this new embrace of tourist art, is there still a distinction to be made between “art” and the “souvenir industry”? The line between the two seems much clearer the further the object veers into the realm of the aforementioned kitsch: I am immediately reminded of the shop I visited in Kathmandu, selling intricately embroidered “Hard Rock Café Kathmandu” t-shirts,
although no such restaurant existed there. These t-shirts were clearly souvenirs for tourists: they were mass produced by machine and made to order, with a number of designs on display from which one might choose. But even here, I find myself asking, which function is dominant for me? With their elaborate and colorful embroidery, if dominance of the aesthetic function is synonymous with the definition of art, are these shirts more functional as a wearable item of clothing, or do I simply find them beautiful?

Endnotes

1 See Roszika Parker’s and Griselda Pollock’s Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology for an example of a discussion of the ways in which the conventional classification of art into major and minor genres, such as fine and applied arts, have devalued women’s art. See Shelly Errington’s The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress for a discussion of the ways in which artifacts made by third- and fourth-world women, created from soft materials have often been labeled as craft and sold anonymously, while artifacts made by third- and fourth-world men, created from the traditional materials of European art, such as paint and canvas, have often been labeled as art an sold with the artists’ names attached.

Works Cited


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The academic grudge match over the relative modernity or postmodernity of our own era (or, to put it another way, the relative modernism or postmodernism, though I’m already getting ahead of myself) has now gone on for so long that one could only charitably describe the debate as a “modern” one. This very same continued wrangling of scholars and critics over the nature of all things (post)modern, however, demonstrates the need for a continued reassessment of the terms of argument surrounding periodization and style in the study of culture. Though recent works have done much to trouble the master narrative of modernism, further interdisciplinary studies of the kind I briefly outline in this essay are needed in order to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism as one perhaps characterized more productively through a thorough reckoning with its uneasy continuities than through the facile recognition of its (apparent) ruptures.

Cultural critics Antoine Compagnon and Peter Wollen both interrogate the received history of modernism by positing paradox as the dynamo powering its dualistic heart. In *The 5 Paradoxes of Modernity*, Compagnon characterizes the “modern tradition” as one “made up wholly of unresolved contradictions” (xvii). For him, these contradictions illustrate moments of
crisis in the trajectory of the modernist project, moments in which modernism struggles against itself, struggles against the transformation into that which it so vehemently opposed (and perhaps, depending on the moment at which one positions the end of modernism, continues to oppose), the calcifying forces of tradition. Wollen reveals the simultaneously narcissistic and anxious self-image of modernism “as the culmination of the long history of Western culture” (205). He carefully notes, however, the elements of modernism (Orientalism, surrealism, etc.) which, not fully assimilable, tell a story that diverges from the master narrative promulgating modernism as a kind of singular, near-unilateral enterprise. Rather, Wollen argues for modernism as a set of binary relationships that structure the discourse surrounding the historical moment(s) in question: “functional/decorative, useful/wasteful, natural/artificial, machine/body, masculine/feminine, West/East” (29). As such, Wollen articulates his project, the charting of an alternative history for modernism, as a kind of deconstruction, an examination of the historical narrative that begins, not from the point of view of those who dominate the extant histories, but “from the side of the negative, the Other, the supplementary—the decorative, the wasteful, the hedonistic . . . the feminine, the Orient” (29). Both critics use paradox and binary structure as the starting points for their attempts to reconcile the contradictions of modernity and postmodernity.

In his explication of (perhaps) the central paradox of modernism, the relationship of tradition to that which we call “modern,” Compagnon argues that “[w]hat is traditional has long stood in contrast to what is modern, not to mention modernity or modernism: the modern broke from tradition and tradition resisted modernization” (xiii). By constructing this binary relationship, Compagnon establishes the primacy of the temporal in conceptions of modernity, a primacy fully illustrated in the shift in usage (from spatial to temporal metaphor) undergone by the term avant-garde, a shift possibly indicating an alteration in perception engendered through the cultural
changes enabled by the technological advances most fully typified in industrialization. This paradigm shift resulted in the cultural valorization of the new, of novelty, a process that ultimately portends a self-immolating constant recycling of cultural tropes in the service of a cult of the new/now. Compagnon frames this paradox as a question: “how much authentic value can the new retain amid the modern idolatry that surrounds it, forcing it to renew itself without end, other than what Nietzsche, who attacked modernity as decadence, called the eternal return, that is, the return of the same thing with a new name—fashion or kitsch” (xv)? The question of value lands Compagnon squarely in the field of aesthetics, yet he carefully resists denigrating the new as a force unequal to the lofty demands of tradition, instead choosing to retain for the new a complexity in keeping with the divergent manners in which different theorists and critics have variously viewed it. If, however, one can legitimately characterize the new as merely another example of Nietzsche’s eternal return, Compagnon’s question gets at the heart of strategies typically associated with the postmodern, a historicized category to which Compagnon finds himself, unlike many other critics, unwilling to grant quite the same authority as a radical break from the modern. He does recognize a variance in strategies between what critics describe variously as modern or postmodern: “Quotation, which paves the way for parody and the like, often serves as a litmus test for the postmodern. Wherever there is quotation, the reader can expect the postmodern, as opposed to the modernist utopia of the tabula rasa” (ix). Here, Compagnon evokes the new in the distinction he draws between modern and postmodern; the modern purports to value the new in a seemingly unmediated fashion, while the postmodern repurposes or reconfigures the old to achieve the appearance or “prestige” of the new.

Much of the difficulty here, of course, revolves around radically different notions of precisely what constitutes the modern. Compagnon notes the discontinuities between German
and French conceptions of modernity, for instance, explicating these differences in philosophical, aesthetic, and historical terms:

In German, as Jürgen Habermas insists, modern is inseparable from reason and Enlightenment; breaking away from the modern is therefore identified with obscurantism and neoconservatism, examples of which Habermas finds in French poststructuralism. In France, however, where Baudelaire and Nietzsche are the most prominent moderns, modernity includes nihilism and a distrust of history and progress. This modernity reacts against modernization and is mainly artistic; it is positive only from an aesthetic point of view, whereas the modern project, according to Habermas, is philosophically and historically redemptive. (x)

For Compagnon, Baudelairean modernity stands as the primary exemplar of coherence in meaning between the terms modern and postmodern, rather than serving as the illustration of a rupture. Baudelaire acknowledges the contradictory impulses of modernity, implicitly evoking in the modern condition the specter of its own death, postmodernity. As Compagnon notes, “Modernity, willingly adopts a provocative manner, but its flip side is desperation” (3). He recognizes the temptation to posit a history based on only one side of the proverbial coin, to assimilate (read: annihilate) difference in the service of a rhetoric of “overcoming.”

This very history of “overcoming” (or, at least, attempting to overcome) forms a significant portion of Peter Wollen’s argument regarding modernism. Wollen attends to the overlooked, obverse side of the modernist project in an attempt to illustrate the complexities of aesthetic representation. He demonstrates the lengths to which critics such as Clement Greenberg have gone to suppress this alternative view of modernist aesthetics, citing Greenberg’s view of painting that attempted to reconcile (again, one might read: annihilate) the seeming contradiction
between the functional and the decorative: “No longer should ‘mere’ decoration be applied to ‘mere’ canvas, but a painting should be the fused and transcendent unity of the two. Thus decorativeness could be justified in the name of higher values, to demonstrate – as he wrote of Matisse – ‘how the flesh too is capable of virtue and purity’” (16). Here, Wollen intimates that what Greenberg argues as transcendence might more appropriately go by the name of subordination, the reference to “justification” suggesting the implicit hierarchical structuring of the binary relationship in question. Such a hierarchy might, for some theorists, such as Adolf Loos or Thorstein Veblen, suggest the final liberation of the bourgeoisie from the stranglehold of the aristocracy, the validation of bourgeois values, but history demonstrates such liberation as necessarily somewhat short-lived. Though modernism did indeed reign as king of the aesthetic hill for a time, and “[u]tility, function, fitness and the machine superseded ornament, luxury and erotic display” (21), eventually the pendulum swung in the other direction, and the decorative regained the power and influence that, according to traditional narratives, it had lost when modernism achieved ascendance. Wollen makes clear, however, that, like a spot on an x-ray, “the decorative and the extravagant . . . [were] modernism’s symptomatic shadow[s] from the very beginning” (29). Inextricably bound, the two ideas play out in conjunction with one another simultaneously, rather than strictly in succession, troubling the linear chronological timeline that has often served as the basis for reductive explanations of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism.

For both theorists, then, the structures which bind modernism into an apprehensible object render themselves visible through binary, dualistic relationships characterized by paradox, by unresolved contradiction. Unfortunately, this tenuous reconciliation suffers under the scrutiny of some historians and theorists, who seem content either to ignore or forget the lessons of
poststructuralism, too often representing these relationships as hierarchical. As a result, such critics obfuscate the role of those elements marked as subordinate, if indeed the “subordinate” element gains recognition at all. For Wollen and Compagnon, however, the project of reckoning with the legacy of modernity explicitly consists of wrestling also with its shadow(s), of giving full voice to those whose utterances appear to chip away at the narrative edifice which modernist practice, in conjunction with critical and academic analysis of that practice, has constructed around itself.

Works Cited


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The history of cultural studies and film studies is intertwined. As a discipline film studies preceded cultural studies, but as academia began to shift in response to the new theoretical and methodological perspectives that defined the “cultural turn” the two fields became increasingly linked. As cultural studies gained credibility through the 1960s and 1970s film scholars began to incorporate cultural theory into their work, and scholars in other fields began to study film. Philip Rosen describes this as “the emergence of a generation of thinkers about film who had in common a basic core bibliography regarding theories of culture and criticism” (vii). Without question this relationship broadened the scope of each discipline to their mutual benefit. But while this relationship can be said to be a key component of contemporary research, it cannot be assumed to have the same primary influence in the classroom. There can be little doubt that the political impulse of cultural studies, as attenuated and amplified through film studies, is at risk of being ejected altogether from a system of higher education defined by a corporate management ethos. If the two fields are to have a shared future, scholars and educators need to be vigilant,
active, and even mercenary in their defense of their discipline and, most importantly, their shared methodological perspective.

Both cultural studies and film studies have become victims of the increasingly corporate structure of higher education in the United States. In his essay “The Corporate University in American Society” David Schultz defines the corporate university in part as “market participants and actors, competing for investors, students, and revenue” (Schultz). This is increasingly the case for all colleges and universities, reaching far beyond those typically associated with the corporatization of higher education such as the University of Phoenix. Indeed, the corporate management model seems to be the solution for schools facing decreasing state funds and limited private sector investment. With an imperative to cut costs and raise revenue, public universities are seeking to increase enrollment in programs that are cash positive, including professional development programs and online courses, and to cut programs which cost too much. This is done in part by reducing the number of tenured faculty; but indirect, and less controversial, methods can be just as effective. By linking budget allocation with enrollment numbers, programs and departments are forced to adapt their curricula to appeal to more students in the hopes of generating more majors and minors. One of the ways departments seek to accomplish this is by “meeting students on their own ground,” offering courses on topics which are considered interesting to incoming undergraduates or by making core required classes more appealing through the addition of multimedia elements, including film or other pop culture products. This poses a direct threat to the critical, interdisciplinary nature of contemporary cultural studies and film studies alike.

An important distinction can be made between film studies and studies with film, where “studies” is a stand-in for any discipline which does not take film as its primary subject. This is
not to privilege one over the other. Watching the *Jazz Singer* (Alan Crossland, 1927) in an American History class, where the focus in doing so might be on representations of racial difference in the U.S. in the pre-civil rights era, need not be considered less valuable an experience for students than watching it in a History of Film course, where the focus would be on elaborating industry and production conditions surrounding the transition to sound film in the late 1920s. They are different projects with different ends. These examples are, however, inextricably related. What unifies them is a commitment to a methodology, an interdisciplinary imperative, which cannot be sustained if the only reason to show a film in class is to generate student interest in the hopes of remaining a financially viable component of a corporate university.¹ Only by maintaining a methodology that demands textual, historical and cultural analysis can cultural studies and film studies remain vital, critical components of academia and, hopefully, stave off the dilution of purpose necessarily resulting from a shift to studies with film for financial reasons. Richard Maltby’s contention that “Hollywood cinema must be understood through the specific historical conditions of its circulation as a commercial property” challenges scholars to develop a dynamic interdisciplinary approach to film study (554). Acknowledging from the first that “movies are products for consumption” and have a “commercial existence” allows scholars to take a comprehensive view of movies otherwise denied them by other methodologies (Matlby 554). Far from limiting the scope of film study, such an approach demands nuanced application of multiple, discrete knowledges, all of which play a part in creating movies as cultural products. Such a demand can, and should, be made in the classroom as well.

Eric Smoodin describes four categories for teaching the history of film and film study in America in the introduction to the anthology *Looking Past the Screen*. The first he describes as
“industrial systems” consisting of technological advancements, labor practices and economics. Second are regulatory systems, including censorship. Third is what he describes as reception, but would in cultural studies be called audience or fan analysis. Fourth is representation, “the images and narratives that make up the text” (4). All but the final category necessitates studying material outside the film itself, by definition placing the larger subject well within the bounds of not only cultural studies but other disciplines as well. For Smoodin the primary sources for comprehensive film study must include, but can never be limited to, the film itself.

This is a familiar position for cultural studies scholars, and well established in film studies. What Smoodin suggests speaks to the very heart of cultural studies as a politically motivated academic discourse. To take on film study as a comprehensive, interdisciplinary task requires the continued examination of what Stuart Hall called “the nexus of culture and power” (ix). Although Hall was speaking about the subculture projects undertaken at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Study at Birmingham, Smoodin’s contention that there is more to be found behind the creation of the cultural product (film) than in the product itself provides a methodological foundation for a type of “cultural historical analysis of the social formation” through film instead of subculture (Hall viii). Placing film into a historical context, then, is vital for both a thorough understanding of the industrial influences, regulatory restrictions, reception and representation of the film itself, but can also be a critical lens to examine the ways in which American culture is injected into the process at every stage. These elements stand to be washed away entirely in the corporate university.

Although the dangers posed by corporate management of education are imminent, some issues are pre-existing. The methodology described by Smoodin is not, he argues, universal. Many film classes are built around the film as a text, not historical analysis, so “classes in which
films are not shown or that form a secondary part of the curriculum seem unthinkable, primarily because of the architecture of the classroom and the time devoted to each class” (17). Any history the students encounter is text based, concerned with aesthetics and narrative and little else. While this may indeed be the case for some film classes, classes in other departments, such as History or American Culture Studies, offer a venue where the film is indeed a secondary, yet vital, part of a larger curriculum. When there is no methodology at all, however, both disciplines, as well as the students, are done a grave, lasting disservice. Unfortunately this possibility is made more likely by the unique positioning and checkered history of popular culture studies in the United States.

The failure to adopt comprehensive historical analysis as a standard film studies methodology may have less to do with film studies or the rise of studies with film than with the confused nature of popular culture studies. Popular culture is the secondary specialty du jour. The national Popular Culture Association conference features dozens of film panels and hundreds of presenters, most in programs or departments which are not wholly concerned with either film or popular culture. It is not unfair to suggest that the bulk of work being done on film outside of film studies programs is tackled in programs where writing a paper on a movie is a delightful distraction. Yet, because of the close association of cultural studies and film studies, and by extension popular culture studies, there is a prevailing sense that to study popular culture means to study film. This poses an interesting problem. Despite the clear relationship between cultural studies and popular culture studies it is also true that, with a lone exception (the popular culture studies department at Bowling Green State University), popular culture studies is a discipline within disciplines, broken up and practiced in other fields—History, English, and Film, to name a few. And while film may be too well established to suffer a similar fate, there
still exists the possibility that if film can be taught profitably in other departments, maybe separate film programs, schools or departments will be sacrificed to budget cuts.

If the conflation of film and popular culture are not problematic enough there is another, perhaps more pressing, issue: popular culture has lost its politics. British cultural studies was imported roughly around the same time that Dr. Ray Browne and others were advocating for the academic study of popular culture in the United States. While some political discourse remains in concepts like hegemonic power and approaches like critical theory, the dominant concern over the “nexus of culture and power” does not have a strong foothold in the American study of popular culture. A lot of energy and ink was expended in the long debate over what constituted popular culture, where it could be found, and what it meant. While British theorists were concerned with the ways in which hegemonic power was expressed through systems of media, American popular culture scholars were teasing out the functions and meanings of certain motifs in genre fiction. Historical analysis and everything it represented for British cultural theorists was pushed aside in favor of detailed interpretations of specific texts. The impact of this is still evident today.

It need not have worked out this way. Even in the earliest stages of defining the new academic field, Dr. Browne advocated for a comprehensive view of popular culture that mirrors Smoodin’s perspective on film. In his germinal essay “Popular Culture: Notes Towards a Definition” published in 1972 Browne offers his own, inclusive, definition. He writes:

One serious scholar defines total culture as ‘the body of intellectual and imaginative work which each generation receives’ as its tradition. Basing our conclusion on this one, a viable definition for Popular Culture is all those elements of life which are not narrowly intellectual or creatively elitist…
Popular Culture consists of the spoken and printed word, sounds, pictures, objects and artifacts. “Popular Culture” thus embraces all levels of our society . . . It includes most of the bewildering aspects of life that hammer us daily (21).

Browne’s argument for inclusion is meaningful. At the time he was making a case for popular culture to enter the academy as a valued subject of intellectual inquiry. But Browne was also quick to note that his definition would eventually become invalid. “Such a definition” he wrote, “provides the latitude needed at this point, it seems, for the serious scholar to study the world around him (sic) . . . inclusiveness is perhaps better than exclusiveness” (21). Browne’s model was meant to be reconsidered and altered over time. In fact, he felt it was vital.

Browne’s insistence that popular culture be considered a comprehensive pursuit extended beyond subject matter and into methodology as well. In an essay published in 1984 titled “Popular Culture as the New Humanities” Browne wrote: “For academics a proper examination is the numerous other fields of inquiry going on around them. There is a symbiotic relationship between popular culture and these many other fields of investigation” (84). Failure to exploit opportunities creates an atmosphere in which those in power hinder progress to their own ends, Browne argues, suggesting that “Although Elitists through time continually change their statements about their clothes, history always recognizes the fraud and convicts them of indecent exposure” (84).

Smoodin and Browne are both arguing for the same thing – comprehensive, interdisciplinary analysis in their respective fields. And although there remains the need to confront the text directly, the great benefit of considering it only a part, albeit an important one, of a much larger web of relationships cannot be ignored. The fact that film has been wrapped up
into popular culture studies is not wholly negative, even if current conditions are not entirely favorable to the kind of work Smoodin suggests. Rather, comprehensive study of film from a popular culture context, within the framework suggested by Browne, may over time help bring the politics back to popular culture study in the United States while simultaneously offering an expansive film studies perspective.

A comprehensive film studies approach could lead to adoption and adaptation across a number of different fields and disciplines within the academy, forcing scholars to make new personal, theoretical and political connections in an attempt to better understand and order the world around them. But it is also an opportunity to directly challenge the imposition of a corporate structure in higher education from the ground up. If departments maintained a dedication to the type of analysis now familiar to cultural studies and film studies scholars, even studies with film would present a nuanced, critical perspective in the classroom in direct opposition to the economic demands of a corporate institution. Even in the case of department or university designed courses this perspective could be maintained, provided the faculty involved were dedicated to the project. It just may be that film studies and popular culture studies, despite their awkward and perhaps disadvantaged positions, are in fact positioned to offer direct challenges to corporate universities as a result of their popularity, ubiquity and diffusion.

Notes

1 This issue becomes even more pressing in light of the increasing use of adjuncts and instructors hired not for their relative expertise but because they are cheaper than full-time, tenured faculty.
Works Cited


Justin Philpot is a doctoral student in the American Culture Studies program at Bowling Green State University. Against all advice he is still interested in nearly everything.
Media Studies as “Work That Matters”:
Intersections between Media Studies and Cultural Studies in the Analysis of Popular Culture

Rosalind Sibielski

The study of popular culture texts is one of the sites at which the disciplinary concerns of media studies and cultural studies converge. There is a large amount of media studies scholarship that is written from a cultural studies perspective, as well as a large amount of cultural studies scholarship that examines popular media. This is not to suggest that all media studies work is cultural studies work, or that all cultural studies work focuses on media texts or media production; nor is it to suggest that all work in either field should be exclusively devoted to a cultural studies approach to media analysis. Rather, it is to point out that the study of popular media in both fields is at something of a crossroads in the current moment, one at which I think it is necessary for those of us who work in the intersecting spaces between media studies and cultural studies to acknowledge the ways in which media analysis undertaken from a critical cultural studies perspective is vital to both fields.

The importation of audience reception study from literary scholarship into media and cultural studies scholarship over the past thirty years has been a crucial development in both
disciplines, opening up new areas of research around fan cultures, fandom practices and the various uses to which audiences of popular media texts employ those texts. A lot of innovative and significant work has come out of the application of audience reception study to the analysis of popular media, including DavidMorley’s *The Nationwide Audience: Structure and Decoding* (1980), John Fiske’s *Television Culture* (1987), Alexander Doty’s *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (1993), Constance Penley’s *NASA/Trek: Popular Science and Sex in America* (1997), and Henry Jenkins’s *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006)—all of which are concerned to one degree or another with examining the ways in which audiences of popular media texts appropriate those texts in order to negotiate or to subvert the dominant cultural values embedded within them. More recently, however, there has been a notable shift in scholarship surrounding popular media away from writing about fandom practices in relation to a particular text and towards writing about particular texts from a fan perspective, a perhaps unintended side effect of the marriage of audience reception study to media and cultural studies work that has begun to blur the distinctions between blog entries on Internet fan sites, music, film or television reviews in the popular press, and the critical analysis of media texts that both media studies and cultural studies have traditionally taken as a central component of their respective scholarly endeavors.

As a result, the scope of the study of popular media within both fields threatens to narrow to uncritical celebrations of aesthetics or narrative that are less interested in contextualizing the study of popular media within a historical and cultural framework than in reflecting on the pleasures of consuming a given text. One of the most obvious examples of this approach to media analysis can be found in the large body of scholarship generated around the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in the refereed academic journal *Slayage: The Online*
International Journal of Buffy Studies, the majority of which is devoted to formalist analyses of the program, as well as to arguments for why it should be considered an exemplary television text. However, this is certainly not the only site at which the analysis of popular media is limited to the level of the text, precluding any examination of its social or political dimensions. In the last year alone Popular Culture Association regional conferences in the United States have included entire panels devoted to tracing particular themes or representational motifs in the television series Mad Men, True Blood and Torchwood (to cite just a few examples), none of which undertook to examine these series within a larger cultural or ideological context, but all of which engaged in uncritical ruminations on their formal characteristics and/or the pleasures of viewing them.

Formalist analysis is, of course, a fundamental part of the study of popular media, and I want to be clear at this point that I am not arguing that it doesn’t have a place in either media studies or cultural studies scholarship, nor am I suggesting that formalist analysis is less important to these fields or less consequential as scholarship than ideological analysis is. What I do want to suggest is that if formalist analysis is not balanced by approaches to the study of popular media that move beyond the text itself, and if the only criteria for formalist analysis is the level of enjoyment derived from consuming a given text, then media scholarship becomes closed off from potential avenues of inquiry that not only broaden the range of that scholarship, but also connect the production and consumption of media texts to the material conditions, dominant values and social structures of the cultures in which they are created and in which they circulate. It is an emphasis on this aspect of popular culture that ideological analysis has brought to media studies, and this emphasis needs to remain central to scholarship surrounding popular
media if that scholarship is to continue to have any relevance beyond an appreciation of the art of media production.

Debates over the merits of scholarship that celebrates popular culture versus scholarship that critiques it are, of course, not new to the field of cultural studies, which has been divided almost from its inception between two distinct approaches to the study of cultural texts and practices, one predicated upon interrogating their ideological uses and one predicated upon praising their populist appeal. Designated respectively as “British” and “American” cultural studies, these approaches are not rooted in nationalist identity (nor the national affiliation of their practitioners, who span all parts of the globe), but rather in their focus on and their interest in the study of popular culture. American cultural studies emerged primarily out of the work of scholars in the United States like Russell Nye and Ray Browne, the latter of whom founded the first academic department devoted exclusively to the study of popular culture at Bowling Green State University in 1973. In response to critics like Dwight MacDonald and Edmund Wilson who lamented the rise of popular mass produced and distributed entertainment forms, in part because of their “lowbrow” content and in part because of their purported status as “commodity” rather than as “art,” Browne and Nye were among the first to argue for the legitimacy of popular culture both as culture and as an object of academic inquiry.

Much early scholarship in the American cultural studies vein is concerned with the question of how to define “popular” culture—and, by extension, how to delineate the interrogatory scope of cultural studies in ways that differentiate it from other fields like literature, sociology and anthropology that also study popular texts or practices. This focus on examining what popular culture is continues to inform contemporary media scholarship that follows in the American cultural studies tradition. It is also one of the ways in which media
studies work undertaken from the American cultural studies perspective differs from media studies work undertaken from the British cultural studies perspective, which takes as its focus not the question of which media texts are popular, but rather why it matters that they are.

Perhaps because in early American cultural studies scholarship theorizations of the popular are frequently inseparable from attempts to differentiate popular culture from elite culture in ways that are not dismissive of the relevance or the value of popular culture, this scholarship is also primarily concerned with justifying why popular culture is worthy of scholarly analysis. To this end, Browne argues in his foundational essay “Popular Culture as the New Humanities” that

the so-called ‘elite’ or ‘minority’ culture may have some influence according to the degree it is brought to the people and made applicable to their everyday lives. But the popular culture is already with the people, a part of their everyday lives, speaking their language. It is therefore irresistibly influential. What it is, the way it works and its relation to the other humanities need to be understood if we are to appreciate its overwhelming influence in our lives. (75, italics in original)

This need for American cultural studies to justify itself as a legitimate form of intellectual inquiry in its early days is one of the things that aligns it with British cultural studies, which also faced a similar task in its infancy. Significantly, though, while early British cultural studies work often argued in a similar manner for the value in studying culture (popular or otherwise), when debates concerning social and intellectual differentiations between elite and mass culture are taken up within British cultural studies scholarship it is almost always to interrogate the ideological function of these differentiations, as, for example, in Pierre Bourdieu’s Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste. This is in marked contrast to American cultural
studies work, where the stake in challenging the cultural supremacy of elite culture over mass culture is almost always one of aesthetic value.

Thus, when Browne argues for the importance of understanding “what [popular culture] is, the way it works and its relation to the other humanities” in order to “appreciate its overwhelming influence in our lives” in the passage quoted above, what he is arguing for is the importance of valuing high art and low art equally, so that we can come to the realization that “much of the popular culture is to be appreciated” (76), not for the importance of fully “appreciate[ing]” the ways in which cultural texts seek to “influence” our values, our behaviors, or our sense of self. This concern with questions of aesthetics or formal construction over questions of ideology is central to a lot of American cultural studies-influenced work both past and present, which as a whole seems much more invested in arguing for the social relevance of popular texts or practices than in examining, questioning, or critiquing their social impact. Accordingly, Lawrence E. Mintz, in cautioning against the “merely descriptive, superficially explicatory, or uncritically enthusiastic examinations of popular culture” that he charges “weakened some programs and publications” in the early years of American cultural studies (155), offers a set of critical criteria for the analysis of popular culture from within an American cultural studies framework. That criteria, though, while demanding attention to the question of “what kinds of aesthetic evaluations might further our understanding and appreciation of the popular culture artifact?” (159) limits ideological analysis to the question of “how can we relate the popular culture artifact to the society in which it is found?” (159) rather than addressing the question of “what meanings do the cultural artifact attempt to communicate about/to the society in which it is found?”
Similarly, David Feldman asserts that John Cawelti’s essay “The Concept of Formula in the Study of Popular Culture” was a “milestone” in American cultural studies scholarship because it “argued that it is possible to ascertain recurrent conventional systems, or ‘formulas,’ in popular literature that are peculiar to a given culture, and suggested that these narrative formulas could tell us much about the dreams, values and often otherwise unarticulated needs of that culture,” but both Feldman and Cawelti stop short of suggesting that these formulas—nevermind the “dreams, values and . . . needs” that they ostensibly reflect—could or should be sites for critique (192). This is not to suggest that work following in the American cultural studies tradition is entirely devoid of ideological criticism. It is simply to point out that ideological analysis was not a founding principle within American cultural studies scholarship in the way that it was within British cultural studies scholarship, which as James Carey suggests “could be described just as easily and perhaps more accurately as ideological studies” (65). Indeed, the central scholarly concern that both defines British cultural studies work and separates it from American cultural studies work is what Stuart Hall, generally considered to be one of the founders of British cultural studies, refers to as the “serious enterprise, or project . . . inscribed in what is sometimes called the ‘political’ aspect of cultural studies” which insists that cultural studies work be work that “matters” on a social, as well as on an intellectual, level (“Cultural Studies” 99).

British cultural studies traces its origins to the work carried out by Hall, Paul Gilroy, Dick Hebdige, Angela McRobbie and others at the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies in England in the 1970s, much of which was concerned with interrogating the ways that subcultural groups appropriated aspects of popular culture for subversive or resistant ends. In this way, while the study of popular culture also was and continues to be central to the
project of British cultural studies, cultural studies scholarship in the British tradition has been focused from the beginning on the ways in which popular culture functions as “an arena of consent and resistance” to hegemonic values (Hall, “Notes” 487), and not on elevating its status in the larger culture or facilitating its reception in the academy. It is also worth noting here that, as John Storey cautions, cultural studies work that follows in the intellectual tradition of British cultural studies “cannot (and should not) be reduced to the study of popular culture” (xvi), in spite of the large amount of scholarship focused on popular texts or practices, since popular culture only figures into the discursive aims of British cultural studies to the extent that it serves as a site at which to examine how power operates or how meaning is created within the larger culture, arguably the two theoretical concerns underpinning virtually all scholarship carried out under the banner of British cultural studies. Hall’s “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Popular’” becomes particularly significant within this regard, because it points to the ways in which the engagement of British cultural studies work with popular culture is not directed at defining or defending “the popular,” as it is in American cultural studies work, but rather in examining “why ‘popular culture’ matters” in terms of political struggles over power and meaning (487).

This theoretical preoccupation within British cultural studies work on questions of “the politics of culture” (Hall, “The Problem of Ideology” 396) is perhaps due to its grounding in Marxist theory. Although, like American cultural studies, British cultural studies is essentially an interdisciplinary endeavor that has incorporated theories and methodologies employed by a variety of other academic fields that also study popular culture—anthropology, sociology, folklore, literary studies and linguistics, to name just a few—the biggest theoretical influences on British cultural studies by far have been Marxism and semiotics. As Storey notes, “Marxism informs [British] cultural studies in two basic ways . . . [British] cultural studies argues that
culture’s importance derives from the fact that it helps to constitute the structure and shape the history” through which we interpret and understand the world around us, and “[British] cultural studies assumes that capitalist industrialist societies are societies divided unequally along, for example, ethnic, gender and class lines . . . [and] that culture is one of the principle sites where these divisions are established and contested” (xvi). At the same time, semiotics, particularly as utilized by Roland Barthes in his landmark Mythologies (a foundational text for British cultural studies), provides a framework for understanding how culture functions to “establish or contest” these divisions, since it invests the processes through which meaning is encoded into cultural texts or practices and decoded by audiences/participants (not always in ways that are consonant with one another) with the ability to function as a site at which power is both exercised and resisted.

It should be noted within this context that in the essay “Popular Culture,” Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson identify Marxism and semiotics as primary influences on the study of popular culture within the American cultural studies framework as well. However, while a concern with the political functions and consequences of popular culture texts or practices shows up in some contemporary scholarship undertaken from an American cultural studies perspective, it is almost entirely absent from the foundational theoretical texts collected in the anthology Popular Culture Theory and Methodology, which claims to be a “[chronicle] of the ideas of some of the pioneers of popular culture study” (1) in the American cultural studies tradition compiled by editors working within the same program where the discipline originated—an omission that suggests that to those editors, at least, this theoretical tradition is not as important a disciplinary concern to American cultural studies as it has been (and continues to be) to British cultural studies.
Media studies scholarship situated within a cultural studies framework has drawn from both the American and British schools of cultural studies, resulting in a similar split between analyses of popular media that interrogate its ideological messages and its ideological uses and analyses of popular media that celebrate either its formal qualities or its popular appeal. While these two approaches to the study of popular media both have particular merits, they yield very different kinds of work with very different goals. They also encourage very different kinds of intellectual inquiry, demand very different theoretical and political commitments of their practitioners, and have a very different stake in their execution. While it is not my intention here to argue that media analysis that is only concerned with formalist critique does not matter, I do think that it is work that matters in a different way from media analysis that engages in ideological critique, and how they both matter is a crucial question for those of us who engage in this kind of work. It is on these grounds that I want to argue that ideological critique needs to have a prominent place within the disciplinary concerns of media studies.

Following Hall, I believe that media studies work should also strive to be work that matters on a level beyond just the field of media studies itself. I do not deny that there is a value to the kind of media scholarship that is concerned with applying theories of political economy to an examination of the castaway community on the television series Lost or analyzing the film The Dark Knight as an example of neo-noir visual aesthetics, but if this is the only approach used in analyzing popular media, then its study ends up an insular endeavor that ignores the myriad ways in which media texts (which are not produced and do not circulate in a vacuum) both reflect and shape the values and the practices of the cultures in which they are created. While I don’t think it is necessary that all media studies work engage in ideological critique, I do think it is necessary for media studies work undertaken from a cultural studies perspective to do so. Hall
argues that cultural studies work should first and foremost be work that “always thinks about its intervention in a world in which it would make some difference, in which it would have some effect” (“Cultural Studies” 109). Extending this goal to the analysis of popular media is arguably both the greatest contribution and the greatest value of the intersection between the disciplinary concerns of media studies and cultural studies, but working towards that goal requires a commitment on the part of those of us who are engaged in the study of popular media from a cultural studies perspective to move beyond merely celebrating the pleasures of consuming media texts to consciously and critically engaging in examinations of how both our consumption of popular media as cultural consumers and our critique of it as media scholars affects the social and political conditions under which we live our daily lives. Media studies work and cultural studies work may be distinct from one another, but in the critical intersections between media studies and cultural studies both fields are enriched by a focus on the study of popular media that engages the text under analysis with the values, practices and perceptions of both the audiences that consume it and the culture in which it is consumed. It is in this way that, in Hall’s words, both disciplines go about “developing intellectual and theoretical work as a political practice” and not merely as an academic endeavor (“Cultural Studies” 103).
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Appendix:
A First Pass through Alternative Media Sites

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As the introduction explained, we have assembled this provisional list of links to alternative media sites to facilitate studies of news and art that is different in form and substance from the corporate products that continue to be the primary focus of film and media studies. While critical analysis of corporate media remains a vital field of activity, as the editorial essay in the fall 2009 issue suggested, alternative, not corporate, media is more likely to provide material for studies of popular culture and subversive expression. Please send any corrections, updates, and suggestions for presenting and sharing this type of information to cbaron@bgsu.edu Note: the web portal Miro lets you download, stream, and save material from many sites; software at www.miro.com

Alternative news and art website:

http://submedia.tv/stimulator/

Alternative news websites:

http://www.alternet.org/
http://www.altpress.org/
http://www.chris-floyd.com
http://www.commondreams.org/
http://www.counterpunch.org/
http://www.democracynow.org/
http://dissidentvoice.org/
http://english.aljazeera.net/
http://www.fair.org/index.php
http://www.feministing.com/about.html
http://www.greenisthenewred.com/blog/
http://www.hrw.org/
Alternative art/media websites:

http://www.bignoisefilms.com/
http://www.boingboing.net
http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/index.html
http://www.critical-art.net/
http://freemusicarchive.org/
http://www.freerangestudios.com/about-us.html
http://www.notbored.org/index1.html
http://revoltagainstplenty.com/
http://www.rhizome.org/
http://www.rtmark.com/index.html
http://www.ubu.com

Another overview of alternative media websites:
http://www.vaughns-l-pagers.com/politics/alternative-media.htm

For points of contrast – conservative “alternative” news websites:
http://www.cnsnews.com/home
http://townhall.com/