

# Introduction

## Editorial Collective

The present issue marks *Synoptique's* tenth anniversary. The journal has undergone a variety of changes over the years. Founded in 2008 as a master's student-led journal, it transitioned to a graduate-led publication in 2012 and since then has been committed to promoting innovative research in film and media studies. Issues have combined a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches, as demonstrated by special themes as diverse as queer media practices, Indian cinema, moving image archives and the digital transition, film festival networks, queer nationalism, humour and feminist media theory, the aesthetics of cinema technology, and archival film training. In the past year, we have re-imagined *Synoptique* under a collectively organized model. This short introduction marks the first publication of the new Editorial Collective, whose formation represents a commitment to amplifying the voices of those who have participated in the journal in different capacities. Restructuring into a collective, much as the student-bricklayers seen on our cover, is a process of collaborative learning, rebuilding, and transformation. With the existing structure of the journal as a baseline, we have initiated new directions organizationally and editorially. Together, we strive to counter the established mechanisms that we find in the university through tactics of collaboration, which mobilize against the individualizing impulses of competition, innovation, and instrumentality.

To signal this shift, we have decided to make 7.2 an open call issue, thus moving away from our traditional thematic focus, in order to

promote a wide variety of scholars pushing media studies research in new directions. By leaving the theoretical and topical boundaries somewhat open for this issue, the journal has resolved to bring together a set of articles that reflect the mutable concerns and priorities of our own field. We are aware of the risks of such a decision. The proliferation of journals in film and media studies, and the pressure on graduate students and early-career researchers to “publish or perish,” possibly in the highest-ranked venues out there, makes the environment to which *Synoptique* intends to contribute overcrowded and subject to the same dynamics we seek to work against. By starting anew with an open call, we have chosen to privilege for once the theoretical, methodological, and practical stances we believe in over a more specialized, enclosed domain. Thus, this issue opens up, or at least gestures towards, a space of inclusion, putting this mission before the demands of specialization and niche-carving.

If this does not mean that the journal is abandoning the thematic model, we are nonetheless committed to experimenting with how a journal can operate within and against the prevailing logics of the academic environment. As the field has been recently affected by a profound reevaluation of its traditional paradigms, *Synoptique* intends to provide a platform for publication, discussion, and reflection on the new political-cultural formations shaping media studies discourse. In this respect, the journal aims to intervene in key debates within media studies while critically tackling the economics and politics of scholarly activity,

addressing dominant trends in academic research conducted within the historical, ideological, and institutional limits of the neoliberal university. In addition to, and as an extension of, this impetus, the journal aims to showcase approaches that address the transnational and global dimensions of moving image media research. It is with this spirit that the Editorial Collective is currently working on upcoming issues on media, logistics, and environmental crisis (8.1) and labour in the post-Fordist media industries (8.2).

With Benjamin Ogrodnik's "Super 8 Chic: The Collision of Small Gauge Film, Visual Ethnography and Filmic Portraiture in Peggy Ahwesh's *Pittsburgh Trilogy* (1983)," the issue opens on a call to reconsider the career of Pittsburgh filmmaker Peggy Ahwesh as an "experimental ethnographer," borrowing from Catherine Russell's terminology (1999). By focusing on Ahwesh's lesser known films, and on the often overlooked film scene of Pittsburgh, this essay reflects on the experimental documentation of the city's subculture, and on questions of gender and self-performance. Drawing on the rich scholarship on visual anthropology and experimental ethnography, Ogrodnik asserts that Ahwesh's use of "paratactical editing, repetition, parody, and collage [...] aims to redefine the ethical dimensions of visual ethnography toward being more empathic, more open to forms of Otherness, and nonhierarchical." In this recuperation of Ahwesh as an "experimental ethnographer," the author contributes to opening the canon of the portrait film genre (marked by the influence of Andy Warhol), and to the conversation on the relation between post-industrial urban centers and the experimental film scene.

Alena Strohmaier and Lea Spahn's "Intra-Active Documentary: Philip Scheffner's *Havarie* and New-Materialist Perspectives on Migrant Cinema," confronts the politics and ethics of image regimes surrounding the European refugee "crisis." The authors examine Philip Scheffner's 2016 film *Havarie*, a work which extends a short 2012 YouTube video—capturing a small migrant boat close to the Spanish coast—to a 1 hour 30 minute feature. As the authors suggest, "the film condenses sound and disassociates it from the image to create what we would like to call an intra-active documentary." Through this formulation of the "intra-active documentary" the authors aim to examine the extent to which "the abundance of images on the

so-called European Refugee Crisis have to be not only acknowledged but also scrutinized accordingly." The wider conceptual argument that underpins this analysis centres on an understanding of cinema "as entangled and mutually co-constituted through its practices [where] body and image are no longer separate entities but instead become reciprocally entangled." Through this textual and conceptual work they suggest "that Migrant Cinema is not a mere representation *by* or *of* migrants; rather cinema and migration are mutually intertwined and codependent."

Lea Le Cudenec's "We deserve better': Tumblr Fandoms and the Fan Activists' Fight for Better Representation of Queer Characters on TV" broadens the scholarship on fan studies by highlighting the connections between fan communities and mainstream media producers. Her focus on fans' content production online, specifically on Tumblr, complicates the already established theoretical frameworks in fan studies, casting a shadow on the utopian celebration of fan participation in digital economies. Le Cudenec hints at how fans' content production on the Internet embodies a form of free labour, "enjoyed by the consumer and exploited by the industry". Media producers adopt different strategies in order to increase fans' engagement and content production. At the same time, the article shows how queer fan communities deliberately shape their identity and participation as activist and resistant against the continuous interferences of media producers to co-opt and normalize fan activity. In particular, Le Cudenec demonstrates how fandoms around the tv shows *Sherlock* and *The 100* have focused on fighting respectively the narrative tropes of Queerbating (the inclusion in tv shows of elements that may suggest a queer relationship between characters only to dismiss any queer reading in the end) and of Bury your Gay (the deadly faith usually waiting the only queer character in a TV show).

With Dylan Cree's contribution to the issue, we find a thoughtful and generous approach to media (an)archaeology and its discourses in relation to an oft-overlooked popular media form: the laugh track. Using the "Laff Box," the industry-standard laugh machine, as an archival technology in itself, Cree reads history against the grain to salvage this particular device from the largely disparaging approaches that scholars have taken to the television practice of canned laughter. However, he opens up

his analysis of this particular technology to wider debates about cultural and historical formations of knowledge, signaling towards both the industrial and technological dimensions of cultural forms. The essay ultimately provides a phenomenological approach to media and experience through which to see the laugh track as a historically embedded practice as well as an archive in itself. Seeing the “Laff Box” in particular as not an archive but an *amarchive* that opens to different ways of doing and seeing media research, Cree reminds us that devices are encoded with the labour, affect, and practices that they both reproduce and contribute to, as the material conditions of television (and other media) industries indicate particular arrangements of work, technology, and culture. Technological forms are always determined and interact vitally with given modes of production and conditions of labour, and Cree productively inscribes this within a media archaeology of the laugh track. Engaging with the work of scholars as diverse as Jeff Scheible, Jonathan Sterne, Friedrich Kittler, and Wolfgang Ernst, the essay is a welcome contribution to ongoing debates around the place of technology within the experience of media as a cultural and industrial form, at one and the same time.

This issue presents an extended book review section, including six pieces across film historiography, digital visuality, video cultures, black performativity, and queer gaming. We propose to read them less as an end in themselves but as a chance to read intersectionally and raise provocative questions on film and media.

Andrea Mariani’s review of *Los Angeles Documentary and the production of Public History 1958-1977* by Joshua Glick, and Matthew Ellis’s review of *Cinema and the Wealth of Nations* by Lee Grieveson highlight how these two books contribute to a reconfiguring of the influence of non-commercial cinema in the building of the culture we currently inhabit. By focusing on the varied Los Angeles documentary film production of the 1960s and 1970s, Glick demonstrates how non-fiction filmmaking in the City of Angels helped shape the social consciousness of the entire nation. Grieveson, on a broader scale, investigates how previously overlooked but extremely influential film practices in early cinema (such as the wide variety of films produced by the Ford Motor Company, among others), were instrumental in the gradual institutionalization of neoliberal ideology in the Anglo-

American context from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

Putting *Life in the Age of Drone Warfare* (2017), *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War* (2017) and *Across and Beyond: A transmediale Reader on Post-digital Practices, Concepts, and Institutions* (2016) in conjunction with each other, Patrick Brodie argues that they offer an exceptional chance to “reflect on life and practice underneath arrangements of digitized and militarized capital.” While Parks and Kaplan’s edited collection puts pressure on undertheorized drone aesthetics as both artistic production and a military and consumer technology, Steyerl’s book, as Brodie contends, situates the post-digital artistic production within militarized financial capital and politics. *Across and Beyond* then carries these similar concerns and raises a range of propositions on digital infrastructures.

Luke Robinson recognizes that *Asian Video Cultures: In the Penumbra of the Global*, edited by Joshua Neves and Bhaskar Sarkar, “both expands and challenges the parameters of Anglophone media studies.” As he argues, the collection’s goal is to recalibrate how we theorize emerging digital practices--popular videos, *shanzhai* technologies, SD cards--that often fall off the current framing fixated on Northern media centers. Despite its different focus, Michael Gillespie’s *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film* similarly challenges an existing conceptual paradigm in studies of “black film”: “What if black film is art and not the visual transcription of the black lifeworld?” Phillip Cunningham’s review pinpoints Gillespie’s contribution to this question by examining four non-mainstream black films, which offers the books its rich textual analysis and critical strength. Lastly, Sarah Stang’s review of Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw’s edited collection *Queer Game Studies* situates the book at the intersection of queer theory and game studies, which makes it an invaluable collection to future critical studies of this subfield. This collection hopes to move beyond “a focus on queer designers and in-game representations in order to investigate the ways in which queerness as a broader theoretical approach might challenge and subvert existing norms.” Similar to Robinson, Stang reminds us that there is still a lot of work to be done to negotiate the tension between queer representation and queerness-as-theory.

The festival reviews section concludes this issue. It reflects the new editorial line of the jour-

nal, with its aim to examine the cultural events in Montreal that define the community of scholars of film studies that we are. By providing reviews of film festivals and cultural events (academic talks, conferences, exhibitions), we hope to ground our presence in the space where we conduct our work. In this respect, we find that reviewing film festivals is particularly relevant, not only because they are a new field of inquiry of film studies in general, but especially for the space they open to reflect on geopolitical and economic forces shaping the visibility and the circulation of certain films. Fidotta and Kokotović's review of the 2017 Festival du Nouveau Cinéma shows the importance of large-scale festivals in shaping our idea of "global cinema." On the other hand, Natalie Greenberg's review of the 2017 Rencontres Internationales du Documentaire de Montréal shows that, through their programming, festivals become microcosms that mirror contemporary socio-political issues.

In all, the contributions to issue 7.2 raise provocative questions and demonstrate the journal's ongoing prerogative to showcase innovative and rigorous research on film and media. In a crowded publication environment, *Synoptique* will continue to provide a platform for this work. We hope you will join us for future issues as we move forward, collectively.