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Mapping Media Studies: An Introduction

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As we write this introduction for the inaugural issue of *MAST*, the world is facing a critical situation with the spread of a novel coronavirus and a pandemic, like fiction that has suddenly become too real. Various computer-generated colorful representations of the virus are available everywhere, circulating quickly on all social media platforms, gaining control of the media, and inventing new discourses through the vast and diverse psycho-socio-political responses provoked all over the world. One could argue that this situation is distinct from past cases because no historical pandemic has ever been experienced alongside the kind of hegemony today's social media commands. Nevertheless, now is the moment, we feel, when rethinking and re-defining the field of media studies seems to make the most sense, because everything appears to be so much more tangibly connected to and dictated by the bodies of media today.

The idea of founding *MAST: The Journal of Media Art Study and Theory* dedicated to interdisciplinary work, was initially fueled by the following motivation: we knew that if media studies in all its forms of hybrid, creative, and queer research models is going to be recognized as contributing to knowledge and humanity, it must be given more platforms and diverse hubs in order to reach beyond its specific contexts and extend to a wider audience. Indeed, despite

the proliferation of interdisciplinary media studies on the one hand, and of PhD programs focused on practice-based research models on the other, there have been relatively few platforms for exhibiting, publishing, and promoting new forms of work and research.

More specifically, we realized the critical need for such a journal over the last five years, while we were conducting research in the Department of Media Study at the University at Buffalo—one of the unique, pioneering, practice-based PhD programs in the country. We were working on a project focused on the history of avant-garde media art and study in Buffalo, the work, pedagogy, and research methods of artists such as Steina and Woody Vasulka, Hollis Frampton, Tony Conrad, Paul Sharits, among others. These were the innovators who helped develop “Media Study” for the next hybrid generation of artist-scholars working in an academic context and who built methodologies for how both media practice and research could come into balance. During that time, we realized that when we wanted to present our work or publish our research projects, there was a scarcity of journals on interdisciplinary media scholarship, including practice-based studies. The need to expand new spaces for dialogue and intellectual exchange was pressing, especially for media studies which was so heavily determined by experimentation and individual practice. We knew then and there that there was a gap in the field and that a journal was needed. Hence, here we are.

The texts in this collection have been written in response to a few questions, which we asked and to which the invited authors responded. What does media studies mean or do, today? What kind of paradigms, discourses, and knowledges can a potential and porous field like media studies offer? The questions invoked a multiplicity of rich and inspiring responses. Media are complex systems that can be studied from various perspectives and that are approached with a variety of methods and techniques; this multiplicity is important for the

meanings, impacts, and results that media studies can engender in communities, whether academic, public, or private. In this sense, the authors in this issue have addressed the above questions from their own personal experiences, methods, and methodologies, based on their past or current research or art projects. The responses are hybrid, ranging from various accounts on mediation, artistic uses of technology, and the discussions of the key concepts and mixed methods in media studies. With this series, we intend to highlight some of the possible directions and likely orientations that this journal will take in the future.

In particular, the field of media studies is expanding beyond its former bounds, to now include not just content but the complex networks, mechanisms, and processes within which messages are transmitted. Media studies is now a “transversal” or “transdisciplinary” field, as Jussi Parikka has argued: “The best way for media studies to really make sense is to think outside of media—of where it expands, takes us, if we persistently follow its lead” (Parikka). To follow this framing, we consider the performative, transformative, and empirical aspects of the field as fundamental because media studies goes beyond limited borders determined only by analytical, theoretical, or research-oriented scholarship. If media studies is defined as a diverse range of practices within media, then it becomes what Kirsten Ostherr calls “applied media study,” a dynamic field that can creatively “intervene in production and consumption that characterize our always-on, always-connected, screen-oriented lives,” bringing in “new strategies” for future research, practice, and teaching (Ostherr 3). This way, media studies is becoming truly multi-disciplinary and international.

“After all, there is nothing real outside our perception of reality, is there? You can see that, can't you?” The question Prof. Brian O'Blivion once asked in the 1983 science fiction film *Videodrome* is a fundamental question that splits off into multiple other speculations regarding

our current realities on- and off-screen. What is real? This question once seemed to be a perpetual major concern of philosophy, but now, the field of media studies has ventured to deal with it as well. From the experience of the illusion of motion in phenakistoscope to the representation of the black hole with the Event Horizon Telescope (EHT), from sense-making machines to non-sensed materialities, media transformed from image to illusion, from texts to numbers in infinite circulations where fact and fiction have the same origins over and over again. Simultaneously, media are transforming our perception of reality as well.

We hope that by launching a media studies journal dedicated to hybrid models and nontraditional approaches to media—with a focus on both art practice and theory, we will be able to make a true contribution to the field. When we began inviting colleagues from across the world to join the *MAST* advisory board—a list of distinguished academics, authors, scholars and practitioners whose works have been inspirational to so many in the field—we received nothing but delighted and encouraging responses that made us ever more determined, enthusiastic, and hopeful. We are deeply grateful and indebted to every single one of our contributors. This acknowledgment would not be complete, however, without recognizing that this journal would not have happened without the invaluable help, encouragement, and enthusiastic support of Carine Mardorossian, a former chair of the University of Buffalo's Department of Media Study and the executive director of NeMLA, whose experience, insight, co-operation and trust—helped us from the beginning until this moment in the actualization of this journal.

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Videodrome. Directed by David Cronenberg, Universal Pictures, 1983.