

Goodbye to Film School: Please Close the Door on Your Way Out

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I am not an expert on film schools, though I used to work in one. Nor have I undertaken an exhaustive analysis of the six hundred such entities that supposedly exist across the United States.¹ But here I am, writing about that symbolic behemoth of the film school, the United States.

Three film schools stand out among the putative six hundred: the University of Southern California (USC—a private university in Los Angeles), the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA—part of the state’s elite ten-campus public system), and New York University (NYU—also private, and where I taught for over a decade). *The Hollywood Reporter’s* list of the top 25 film schools has those three in the top five, along with the Beijing Film Academy and the American Film Institute.² I am particularly interested in these three universities because they are Research-One schools and hence produce ruling-class hegemons and scholarly researchers as well as factory fodder / creatives for world cinema. And their film academies started early—USC in 1929, UCLA in 1947, and NYU in 1965. I’ve drawn on experience, anecdotal repute, and political-economic-environmental analysis to investigate the culture of these film schools, their employment impact, their cost, and their future.

Here’s my headline: film schools shouldn’t exist. They should be schools of media and cultural studies, dedicated to displacing both the residual humanities (textual analysis and history) and the emergent humanities (business studies). The humanities’ share of US students stands at 8–12 percent of the nation’s 110,000 undergraduates.³ That’s less than half the proportion from the 1960s and the lowest point since World War II, apart from Ronald Reagan’s recession. Conversely, between 1970 and 2005, business enrollments increased by 176 percent.⁴ Business studies may not lead to successful employment any more than

does Italian, but its claims to do so and its subsumption of general-education requirements have seen it supplant the humanities as the basis of liberal education (apart from at fancy schools).

As we think about the frantic defensive measures adopted by true believers in the *haute couture* humanities of fancy universities, as opposed to the co-optive capture by capital of creationists in more applied colleges, a key question arises: What sense of the public interest should reform the anachronism that is the film school? My argument is that the core componentry of a liberal education should include media production, albeit with some distance from the film-school model, and that business should be contested as the new omnibus undergraduate field by a materialist media and cultural studies. An answer to the query above comes from the former *New Statesman* editor Peter Wilby:

The idea that the media aren't worth studying is as foolish as the idea, which survived into the 20th century at elite universities and public schools, that science and engineering were not proper subjects for young gentlemen. The media industries, apart from their contribution to G[ross]D[omestic]P[roduct], now impinge on people's lives to an extent unimaginable even 20 years ago. . . . Some education in the media is surely essential. But it suits the industry's owners if citizens lack the skills and knowledge to sustain critical attitudes.⁵

Of course, we face insistent skepticism that the tastes of the Great Unwashed may override those of the Great and the Good. Consider this epigraph from Don DeLillo's postmodern campus novel *White Noise*: "There are full professors in this place who read nothing but cereal boxes. . . . It's the only avant garde we've got."⁶ More importantly, the fact that there is an apparent utility in fields once thought of as only indirectly instrumental, as providing a civilizing training in leadership, makes the new humanities, the one that synchronizes with postindustrialism, a bit of a problem. Forty years ago, Richard Hoggart posed the following question, even as he championed the expansion of cultural studies into the popular and the practical:

What is one to make of a medieval historian or classicist who finds nothing odd—that is, nothing to be made sense of, at the least, if not opposed—in the sight of one of his new graduates going without second thoughts into, say, advertising; or of a sociologist or statistician who will undertake consultant work without much questioning the implications of the uses to which his work is put?⁷

Three decades later, Reaganite journalist Virginia Postrel wrote a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed welcoming media and cultural studies as "deeply threatening to traditional leftist views of commerce. . . . lending support to the corporate enemy and even training graduate students who wind up doing market research."⁸ Ten years on, she luxuriated in its depoliticized maturity: "Fortunately, a field that was once little more than an excuse to bash capitalism has evolved over time, attracting curious scholars who, for all their Marxist-inflected training, genuinely want to understand the phenomena of modern, commercial culture."⁹ The point of Marxism is not to understand it, but to change it, apparently.

But back to US film schools. To me, they resemble dinosaurs, rather like their less glamorous siblings, journalism schools. Exhibition is really just a marketing tool now, and multiplexes in the United States will cease showing “films” in 2013, when they conclude the transition to digital formats.¹⁰ So the very term is a misnomer, one of those bizarre aspects of residual hegemony, a vestigial creature clinging to the wreckage of an ebbing life.

Yet, film schools are *not* dinosaurs—or if they are, they attract lots of paying customers to the interactive mausoleums where they are housed. 136 of them submitted work to the Student Academy Awards in 2010, up from 102 the year before. Nearly 5000 people applied for 300 places at USC in the fall of 2011, up from fewer than 3000 the year before. Similar numbers apply at all prominent colleges.¹¹ China is sending flocks of students, especially women, to the big three US film schools. They reportedly like the equipment and the liberty. At UCLA, the numbers from China are leaping by 50 percent a year, at USC they are doubling, and there is steady growth at all the named institutions, which are sending satellites to Asia and requiring Yanqui students to learn Putonghua.¹² Of course, this is not just about film schools. We have well over 150,000 Chinese students in the United States, for the first time more than South Asians.¹³ It’s all part of the stay-rich-quick strategy that characterizes the exploitative greed / secondary accumulation of contemporary western universities.

In any event, despite the anachronistically romantic nomenclature, students pile into film schools right across the United States. And the top institutions receive headline-grabbing philanthropy. USC, for instance, has a gift of US\$175 million from George Lucas.¹⁴ (It paid for hideous, dysfunctional buildings that he designed. Despite his desire to make the exteriors resemble movie studios, Lucas “ordained” that only digital projection be available inside; “desperate faculty pleas secured one room where film could be screened.”)¹⁵ These donations feature as school publicity to demonstrate proximity to Hollywood and urge others to give, give, give. They also feed into the auteurist fantasies of *bourgeois* individualism that nourish film schools across the nation in their restless quest to summon, to govern, and to commodify humanism.¹⁶

Famous names seem to matter a great deal in this galaxy. James Franco received a “D” at NYU because he spent most of his acting class absent, filming *127 Hours* (dir. Danny Boyle, 2010). His professor, José Angel Santana, was dismissed by the school and filed a lawsuit in the Manhattan Supreme Court alleging retaliation. Santana also claimed that Franco had been given an easy time of it because another faculty member had received screenwriting credit on one of his films.¹⁷ You can see this unfortunate unfurling drama parodied in an acute Taiwanese animation.¹⁸

The people running these establishments are studies in privilege. I once drove a friend to a Hollywood luncheon put on by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Like the other chauffeurs, I was not welcome to sample the delights of the big house. My counterparts stood around in peaked caps, smoking cigarettes and comparing limos. But after dropping off my passenger and parking my compact, I sat down in the hotel lobby to read Hegel. About an hour and a half later, my friend emerged with the dean of a leading film school. “—, this is

my driver,” he said. She walked 360 degrees around my copy of the *Philosophy of Right*, looked me up and down, said “Hmm, not bad,” and walked away. This seigniorial attitude did not warm the heart of my inner Marxist or my outer driver.

I tell this story in part because it fits US film schools’ systematic objectification of the other. Some 30 years ago, Michelle Citron and Ellen Seiter published a groundbreaking study, “The Woman with the Movie Camera,” about the widespread misogyny in US film schools.¹⁹ Citron and Seiter explained that women were marginalized in production classes and victimized in production texts. Seiter recently revisited that work.²⁰ She found that nothing had changed in terms of the taste of film-school men for aggression toward women as the touchstone of their art. The University Film and Video Association’s 2010 conference dedicated special sessions to the tendency for US film-school students from across the world to emphasize brutal violence directed at women in their work.²¹ When I was at the Tisch School of the Arts, I served on a committee charged with stopping male directors from cutting female actors’ bodies in the name of attaining authentic performances from them.

There *have* been changes. Women have made sizeable and long-lasting employment gains in US cable TV. These successes are in postproduction computing work rather than in *auteurist* positions, but they are significant, and in children’s television, women are central across the creative spectrum. And even retrograde places like film schools must adjust to the prevailing political economy. At USC nowadays, women faculty are in charge of sound design, gaming, and editing, and female students make up half the MFA program. Directing is, of course, another thing—and so are dramatic themes, which remain remorselessly violent and misogynistic.²² No wonder USC promotes its film history with a portrait of Greta Garbo kneeling in front of Cecil B. de Mille as he holds a starting gun.²³

Two Cultures

US film schools are now more than the frothy, slightly illegitimate end of campus. They are central to the university’s mission of making money, serving capital, and producing workers. In that sense, film schools modeled the transformation of the humanities to the creative industries that was heralded—80 years late—by true believers in Schumpeterian mythology across Europe and Asia. Film school epitomizes and generates the free and discounted labor that dominates work in postindustrial economies.

More interestingly, film schools are merging the “Two Cultures” that the noted physicist and novelist C. P. Snow detailed 50 years ago. Fearing that “the whole of western society is increasingly being split into two polar groups,”²⁴ Snow saw the “Two Cultures” as a distinction between those who could quote the histories of Shakespeare and those who could quote the laws of thermodynamics²⁵—that is, people fated to repeat the past versus people destined to build the future. Snow would move from South Kensington to Greenwich Village and encounter the same artistic discourse. Each site had “about as much communication with M.I.T. as though the scientists spoke nothing but Tibetan,”²⁶ because arts and

humanities people strolled through life “as if the natural order didn’t exist.”²⁷ The “clashing point” of these discourses had the potential “to produce creative chances.” Yet, “very little of twentieth-century science has been assimilated into twentieth-century art” because “literary intellectuals, are natural Luddites.”²⁸

On the other side of the Atlantic, the economist Fritz Machlup, a neoclassical prophet of the knowledge society, was developing typologies of postindustrial work to help make the United States a research leader by focusing its efforts within a pragmatic opportunity-cost paradigm. While public intellectuals were debating the two cultures, Machlup was publishing a less-celebrated but massively influential paper, “Can There Be Too Much Research?”²⁹ He went on to write *The Production and Distribution of Knowledge in the United States*,³⁰ a bedside essential for emergent ideologists of human capital that showed how the research-and-development emphasis of US industry, state, and education was crucial to both economy and society.

Cut forward a few years to Reagan’s successful 1966 campaign for the governorship of California. He launched it on the campus of—where else?—USC, with the following words: “I propose... ‘A Creative Society’ ... to discover, enlist and mobilize the incredibly rich human resources of California [through] innumerable people of creative talent.”³¹ Reagan’s rhetoric publicly birthed today’s idea of using technology to unlock the creativity that is supposedly lurking, unbidden, in individuals, thereby permitting them to become happy and productive. This idea of the “creative society” was specifically opposed to the “Great Society,” a term coined by the Edwardian Fabian Graham Wallas.³² Wallas’s student Walter Lippmann spoke of “a deep and intricate interdependence” that came with “living in a Great Society.” It worked against militarism and other dehumanizing tendencies that emerged from “the incessant and indecisive struggle for domination and survival.”³³ This idea was picked up by Lyndon Johnson and became the argument for competent and comprehensive social justice in ways that are anathematic to the Republican Party.

Film school encapsulates Reagan’s counter-ideology and answers Snow’s conundrum. For, as Thomas Pynchon put it, looking back on Snow’s *Two Cultures* a quarter of a century after its publication, “All the cats are jumping out of the bag and even beginning to mingle... The most unreconstructed of Luddites can be charmed into laying down the old sledgehammer and stroking a few keys instead.”³⁴ That trend has accelerated. Today’s computer scientists and engineers fetishize narrative, while textual critics and artists fetishize code. The two groups wear the same clothes, go to the same clubs, take the same drugs, sleep with the same people, and play the same games. Relations across the cloisters have changed, with computing technology and its applications to storytelling and art-making known to people in every corner of campus.

Changes in the media and associated knowledge technologies are likened to a new Industrial Revolution or the Civil and Cold Wars, touted as a route to economic development as well as cultural and political expression. Since the 1970s, “knowledge workers” have been identified as vital to information-based industries that generate productivity gains and competitive markets.³⁵ To Cold War futurists such as former national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, cultural

conservative Daniel Bell, and professional anti-Marxist Ithiel de Sola Pool,³⁶ converged communications and information technologies promised the permanent removal of grubby manufacturing from North to South and continued US textual and technical power, provided that the blandishments of socialism, and negativity toward global business did not create class struggle. In the humanities, film schools have been model futurists since before Reagan's prescient announcement and the plans of his fellow travelers.

Work

So film-school graduates are doing things their forebears never expected. But these activities are not all inspired attempts to bridge the gap between cultures. And the way the top film schools function does not prepare their graduates for what they are poised to create and receive as citizens or workers, let alone in a way that enables social justice.

Since 2006, the Hollywood studios have seen revenue from home entertainment drop drastically, as the marvel of DVD was followed by the failure of Blu-ray. In other words, the technological model of built-in obsolescence driving customers to buy new versions of loved texts has ceased to work for the first time since the advent of television in the 1950s. As a consequence, the Hollywood studios have cut expenditure on scripts, limited onsite demountable deals with producers, and slashed junior staff jobs. In doing so, they have severely constricted the pipeline used by both elite and wannabe film schools.³⁷ Once they have graduated, folks traipse off to Los Angeles to serve me and people like me coffee and cocktails—having been hired for a minimum wage based on professional head shots, prerequisites to becoming wait staff.³⁸ A colleague from one of the top schools often bumps into *alumni*. All goes well until he asks what they are up to. “Oh, I’m working,” they say. If further details are grudgingly divulged, it is usually because they are making porn movies in the San Fernando Valley for online, cable, and satellite consumption. They don’t use their own names, and they’re unhappy, but it *is* helping with student loans.

If these alums answer their former teacher in more fulsome detail, it is probably because they are employed, on a precarious basis, by one of the thousands of small firms dotted across the hinterland of California that produce DVD film commentaries, music for electronic games, or reality TV shows.³⁹ The evidence suggests that they are increasingly looking for jobs in visual effects, animation, and video-game development.⁴⁰ They might also be making programs for YouTube’s 100 new channels, the fruit of Google’s 100 million dollar production (and 200 million dollar marketing) bet that five-minute online shows will kill off TV. Explosions are routinely filmed for these channels near my old loft in downtown Los Angeles. The workers blowing things up are paid \$15 an hour.⁴¹

Or these folks might be working for an advertising agency like Poptent, which undercuts big competitors in sales to major advertisers by exploiting consumers’ labor.⁴² Needless to say, it does so in the name of “empowerment.” That

empowerment takes the following form: the creators of homemade commercials make \$7500; Poptent receives a management fee of \$40,000; and the buyer saves about \$300,000 on the usual price.⁴³

Other film-school graduates find employment with talent agencies, doing useful things like associating B-list celebrities with social causes in order to raise their profiles: find a major issue such as a new environmental problem or geopolitical hot spot, pitch it to your guy, set up a foundation, and await admiring press coverage. This is part of the de-professionalization and pseudo-democratization of the media. It takes many forms. Fans become creators as they write zines that in turn become story ideas. Marketers trawl street fairs, clubs, and fan sites to uncover emergent trends. Coca-Cola hires African Americans to drive through the inner city selling soda and playing hip-hop. AT&T pays San Francisco buskers to mention the company in their songs. Street performance poets rhyme about Nissan cars for cash, simultaneously hawking, entertaining, and researching. Subway's sandwich commercials are marketed as made by teenagers. Cultural studies graduates become designers, and graduate students in New York and Los Angeles read scripts for producers and then pronounce on whether they tap into audience interests.

Semiotics textbooks that critically deconstruct commercial culture adorn advertising executives' bookcases. Precariously employed part-timers prowl the streets with DVD players under their arms to ask target audiences what they think of trailers for upcoming movies, or while away their time in theaters spying on how their fellow spectators respond to coming attractions. Opportunities to vote in the Eurovision Song Contest or a reality program determine both the success of contestants and the profile of active viewers who can be monitored and wooed. End-user licensing agreements ensure that players of corporate games online and contributors to official discussion groups about film or television sign over their cultural moves and perspectives to the companies whom they are paying in order to participate.

How might we theorize these developments? The Reaganite futurist Alvin Toffler invented the useful concept, "the cognitariat" a quarter of a century ago.⁴⁴ Sometimes those people get something right. The idea has since been taken up and redisposed by the left. Antonio Negri, for example, applies the term to people mired in contingent media work who have educational qualifications and facility with cultural technologies and genres. The cognitariat plays key roles in the production and circulation of goods and services, through both creation and coordination. This "*culturalization of production*" enables these intellectuals by placing them at the center of world economies, but simultaneously *disables* them, because it does so under conditions of flexible production and ideologies of "freedom."⁴⁵

What used to be the fate of artists and musicians—where "making cool stuff" and working with relative autonomy was meant to outweigh the regular wage and dull security of ongoing employment—has become a norm. The outcome is contingent labor as a way of life. This new proletariat is not defined in terms of location (factories), tasks (manufacturing), or politics (moderation of ruling-class power and ideology). It is formed from those whose immediate forebears, with similar or less cultural capital, were confident about healthcare and retirement

income. They lack both the organization of the traditional working class and the political *entrée* of the old middle class.

Film schools simultaneously model and contribute to the cognitariat. They are also at the forefront of militarism, in keeping with their taste for hyper-masculinity. The Pentagon sends scientists to film school to produce positive images of violent technocracy and educrats and Hollywood élites invite the military to town to explain their needs and hopes for future ideological representations.⁴⁶ This relationship has become more systematic, under the stimulus of media convergence and imperial conjuncture. In 1996, the National Academy of Sciences held a workshop for academia, Hollywood, and the Pentagon on simulation and games. The next year, the National Research Council announced a collaborative research agenda on popular culture and militarism and convened meetings to streamline such cooperation, from special effects to training simulations, from immersive technologies to simulated networks. Since 2001, electronic gaming has become a crucial tool tactically and strategically, because fewer and fewer nations permit the United States to play live war games.⁴⁷

USC's Institute for Creative Technologies (ICT)⁴⁸ was set up in 1998 to articulate film-school faculty, movie and TV producers, and game designers to the defense budget. Film school meets fighter jet, if you like. Formally opened by the secretary of the army and the head of the Motion Picture Association of America, the institute's workspace was dreamt up by the set designer for the *Star Trek* franchise. Initially funded by \$45 million of military money, that figure doubled in its 2004 renewal and trebled to \$135 million in 2011. By the end of 2010, its products were available on 65 military bases.⁴⁹

The institute also collaborates on major motion pictures, for instance *Spider-Man 2* (dir. Sam Raimi, 2004), and produces military recruitment tools such as *Full Spectrum Warrior* that double as "training devices for military operations in urban terrain": What's good for the Xbox is good for the combat simulator. The utility of these innovations continues in the field. The Pentagon is aware that off-duty soldiers play games and wants to invade their supposed leisure time in order to wean them from the skater genre in favor of what are essentially training manuals. The Department of Defense (DOD) claims that *Full Spectrum Warrior* was the "game that captured Saddam," because the men who dug Saddam Hussein Abd al-Majid al-Tikriti out had played it.⁵⁰

Put another way, ICT uses Pentagon loot and Hollywood muscle to test out homicidal technologies and narrative scenarios, under the aegis of film, engineering, theater, and communications professors. To keep up with the institute's work, I recommend the podcast *Armed with Science: Research and Applications for the Modern Military*, available via the DOD.⁵¹ You will learn that the Pentagon and USC are developing *UrbanSim* to improve "the art of battle command" as part of Barack Hussein Obama II's imperial wars. This is described as a small shift from commercial gaming: "Instead of having Godzilla and tornados attacking your city, the players are faced with things like uncooperative local officials and ethnic divisions in the communities, different tribal rivalries," to quote an institute scholar in the pod.⁵²

You might also visit ICT's Twitter address <@usc_ict>, blog <<http://ict.usc.edu>>, and Facebook page <<http://www.facebook.com/USCICT>>, where hortatory remarks of self-regard abound to an extent rarely seen in the postwar era: the institute "is revolutionizing learning through the development of interactive digital media" because by "collaborating with our entertainment industry neighbors, we are leaders in producing virtual humans," thereby furthering "cultural awareness, leadership and health." When universities promote themselves in this way, warning bells ring out like a James Brown funk grunt/auto alarm.

All this is some distance from emulating the directors whose names are rolled out before aspiring entrants to famous film schools. The idea of artistic yet commercially viable filmmakers with the vision and capacity to tell stories continues to enchant people. At NYU, the *alumni* most often mentioned were Martin Scorsese, Spike Lee, and Jim Jarmusch. Yet, for most graduates, the reality will be surviving a complex web of casual labor, working and living precariously and weighed down by debt, as film schools replenish the cognitariat. Perhaps in the future those renowned directors will be supplemented or supplanted in advertising material by porn *auteurs* and Pentagon *аннаратчик* (apparatchiks).

Money

In 2011, USC charged \$42,000 a year in tuition; NYU \$45,674; and UCLA, being a public school, \$12,842 for Californians and \$35,720 for others. By comparison, Beijing Film Academy prices were \$1,240–1,550 for locals and \$6,665–\$7,905 for foreigners; La Fémis \$517 for the French and \$15,334 for the rest of us; and the Prague School \$45,674 (it appears to be pegged to Tisch).⁵³

When I arrived in New York in 1993, 45 percent of undergraduates nationwide borrowed to pay tuition. Now that proportion is 94 percent. Almost 9 percent of debtors defaulted on student loans in 2010, up 2 percent in a year. The average debt in 2011 was \$23,300. Across the country, people who graduated with student loans that year confronted the highest unemployment levels for recent graduates in memory: 9.1 percent.⁵⁴

The US population has borrowed \$1 trillion to pay tuition. The federal government guarantees these loans, which encourages universities to charge more and financial institutions to lend more. Of the trillion dollars owed, upward of \$900 million comes from the state.⁵⁵ Why? Because whereas tuition accounted for 38 percent of the cost of public schools in 1998, the proportion was over 50 percent in 2008. That trend doubled student debt between 1992 and 2000 and again over the next decade.⁵⁶

Of course, the United States is not alone in having this problem, though elsewhere students are more likely to perceive it as part of a wider political issue. In Chile, student strikes against fees and the commodification of universities have been under way for some time. Rodrigo Araya, from the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, says students see university as reflecting social inequality and demand a "new social contract." Anamaria Tamayo Duque of the Universidad de Antioquia in Colombia showed me recent photos of riot police

confronting students demonstrating against fees. Protesters responded to fear-somely adorned officers by kissing their helmets, brushing clean their shields, handing them flowers and cuddling them. In Québec, hundreds of thousands have protested against tuition hikes.⁵⁷

So where do we go from here?

Media and Cultural Studies—a Future

How should film schools be transformed to counter their sexism, militarism, and exploitation? Can they help build a new humanities field *contra* business studies?

I favor media and cultural studies, a *portmanteau* term to cover a multitude of social and cultural machines and processes. There is increasing overlap across media, as black-box techniques and technologies, once set apart from audiences, become subject to public debate and utilization. Consumer electronics connect to information and communication technologies and *vice versa*: televisions resemble computers; books are read on telephones; newspapers are written through clouds; films are streamed via rental companies; commercials are shot with phones; and so on. Genres and gadgets that were once separate are linked. Hence the media component of the field, with “film” being a tiny, tiny element, both technologically and programmatically.

At the same time, the significance of culture has widened in terms of geography, demography, language, genre, and theory. This is a consequence of several connected socio-economic forces. The 1940s–1970s compact across the West between capital, labor, and government has been renegotiated, reversing that period’s redistribution of wealth downward. Key sectors of the economy were deregulated and consumption was elevated as a site of social action and public policy. There have been changes in the international division of labor, as manufacturing leaves the global north and subsistence agriculture erodes in the South. Population has grown through public-health initiatives. Refugee numbers have increased following numerous conflicts among former satellite states of the United States and the fallen Soviet Union because these struggles were transformed into intra- and transnational violence when half of the imperial couplet unraveled. Human trafficking was vastly augmented. Islam and Christianity revived themselves as transnational religious and political projects. And civil-rights and social-movement discourses and institutions developed, extending cultural difference from tolerating the aberrant to querying the normal, then commodifying and governing the result.

In the United States, the nineteenth century’s great wave of immigration left the country 87 percent European American, a proportion that remained static thanks to racialized immigration laws and policies up to 1965. But about a 100 million US residents are today defined as minorities. Latin@s and Asians in the United States are proliferating at ten times the rate of Euro descendants, such that white America is now 64 percent of the population and projected to be 53 percent in 2050. According to the 2010 Census, 50.5 million people (or 16 percent

of the total population) are Latin@, up from 13 percent in 2000. The foreign-born segment of the country is double the proportion in 1970 and half as many again as 1995. As for the labor force, in 1960, one in seventeen workers came from beyond the United States (mostly Europe). Today, the proportion is one in six, the majority from Latin America and Asia. In addition, hybridity is increasingly the norm. In 1990, one in twenty-three US marriages crossed race and ethnicity. In 2010, one in seven did so.⁵⁸

Universities are being transformed by these trends. In the decade to 2008, the proportion of white college students in the United States dropped by 8.6 percent, though they remained the majority ethnic group. Latino numbers grew 5 percent annually, African American 4 percent, and Asian American 3 percent.⁵⁹ The humanities have responded to these developments via an unsteady if understandable oscillation between being “cultural gatecrashers and agents of radical social change or cultural gatekeepers and champions of tradition.”⁶⁰

What kind of curriculum should replace the banal Arnoldian education of the traditional humanities and the supine vocational training of film school and business studies? What can substitute for nostalgic parthenogenesis and instrumental instruction? A third form of life must arise from a blend of political economy, textual analysis, ethnography, cultural production, and environmental studies, such that students learn the materiality of making, conveying, and discarding meaning.

Roger Chartier⁶¹ and Pierre Macherey⁶² offer promising programs for the humanities. They suggest that the study of textuality must take account of linguistic translations, material publications, promotional paratexts, archival categorizations, and the like—an historical and spatial approach that focuses on conditions of existence. Texts accrete and attenuate meanings on their travels as they rub up against, trope, and are troped by other fictional and factual texts, social relations, and material objects, and as they are interpreted—all those moments that allow them to become, for example, “the literary thing.”⁶³

Such an approach fruitfully connects the study of culture to what Ian Hunter calls an “occasion . . . the practical circumstances governing the composition and reception of a piece.”⁶⁴ This is in accord with Alec McHoul and Tom O’Regan’s “discursive analysis of particular actor networks, technologies of textual exchange, circuits of communicational and textual effectivity, traditions of exegesis, commentary and critical practice.”⁶⁵ In a similar vein, there is much to be gained from actor-network theory in tracking the career of globally circulating texts. Bruno Latour⁶⁶ and his followers analyze cars, missiles, trains, enzymes, and research articles by allocating equal and overlapping significance to natural phenomena, social forces, and textual production. This is the “cultural science” about which Stephen Muecke has written so evocatively, “diplomatically engaging with all the human and non-human things in the ecology.”⁶⁷

I also find useful Néstor García Canclini’s alternative to the nativism of Yanqui multicultural discourse via what is referred to in Latin America as interculturalism.⁶⁸ Canclini demonstrates that accounts of culture must engage with three key factors. First, there is a paradox: globalization also deglobalizes, in that its dynamic and impact are not only about mobility and exchange, but also

about disconnectedness and exclusion. Second, minorities no longer primarily exist within nations—rather, they emerge at transnational levels due to massive migration by people who share languages and continue to communicate, work, and consume through them. Third, *demographic* minorities within sovereign states may not form *cultural* minorities, because majoritarian *élites* in one nation often dispatch their culture to another where they are an ethnic minority. In any search for a “common culture,” the risk is totalitarianism,⁶⁹ unless commonality refers to a metacultural concept that is rooted in the negotiation of cultural difference and sameness and opposed to a privileged unity (which generally means some form of exclusionary nationalism).

The fundamental message I take from these models is this: understanding culture requires studying it up, down, and sideways, in accord with Laura Nader’s call for an ethnography of the powerful as well as the oppressed⁷⁰ and George Marcus’s endorsement of multi-sited analysis that focuses on how and where meaning emerges, exists, and expires.⁷¹ That means knowing which companies make texts, physical processes of production and distribution, systems of cross-subsidy and monopoly profit making, the complicity of educational canons with multinational corporations’ business plans, and press coverage, *inter alia*.

Put another way, if film schools are primarily concerned with making meaning, they must consider the wider political economy, not simply in terms of culture as a reflective or refractive index of it, but as *part of* that economy, because culture is the creature, *inter alia*, of “corporations, advertising, government, subsidies, corruption, financial speculation, and oligopoly.”⁷²

Many students at the big three schools know change is necessary. And they see an education in media and cultural studies (but please don’t call it that—the preferred terms are “critical studies,” “cinema and media studies,” and “cinema studies”) as much more crucial than before by contrast with production.⁷³ Changing the current *doxa* of film schools and their kind could enrich students’ and professors’ knowledge base, increase their means of intervention in cultural production, counter charges of social and commercial irrelevance, and make the area’s citizenship and social-movement claims more credible.

Notes

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