

Interdisciplinarity and Social Justice

Revisioning Academic Accountability

Edited by
Joe Parker
Ranu Samantrai
and
Mary Romero

SUNY
PRESS

Published by State University of New York Press, Albany

© 2010 State University of New York

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission. No part of this book may be stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means including electronic, electrostatic, magnetic tape, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior permission in writing of the publisher.

For information, contact State University of New York Press, Albany, NY
www.sunypress.edu

Production by Robert Puchalik
Marketing by Michael Campochiaro

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Interdisciplinarity and social justice : revisioning academic
accountability / edited by Joe Parker, Ranu Samantrai, and Mary Romero.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4384-3135-2 (hbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-1-4384-3136-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

I. Interdisciplinary approach in education. 2. Social justice. I. Parker, Joe, 1956–
II. Samantrai, Ranu. III. Romero, Mary.

LB2361.I47 2010
375'.001—dc22

2009033547

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Chapter Seven

The Other Inters

Augmenting Academic Disciplinarity
to Make Things (Happen)

Alexandra Juhasz

An Inter-duction

I know and use interdisciplinarity as a set of inherited, tested, and productive methods that allow me to work across, between, or among otherwise isolated academic, artistic, and activist traditions in the hopes of better understanding (and then changing) cultural conditions that matter to me. However, although interdisciplinarity is potentially radical, in that it pushes scholars and institutions to consider and then refashion systems of knowledge production and dissemination, like any method or structure, it is not in itself ideological. Social justice is quite specific in its politics: a cluster of historically linked commitments to particular movements, theories, outcomes, and methods, of which interdisciplinarity is merely one. In this chapter, I will suggest that for interdisciplinarity to function as an effective component of social justice work, it is critical to expand our theories and practices concerning the *inter* to include other inters, including inter-locations, inter-languages, inter-practices, and inter-standards. It is difficult to combine these four inters, so it is rarely done—facilitating movement between the academy and other worlds while speaking in languages and engaging in actions and activities that fall outside the norms of our training and employment and academia's traditions of validation. Thus I am keen to share here a small but seminal tradition of a linked body of theoretical

writing and political art making, what I call *media praxis*, that has focused on the complex questions and acts of the many inters. The interdisciplinary tradition of *media praxis*, which I cull from my interdisciplinary field of media studies, has much to teach us in that it demonstrates how to move across, between, and among the academy and the nonscholarly world while wielding accessible modes of communication exhibited through a range of activities and products that are judged on their own terms, and in particular, on their effects on campaigns for social justice.

In my recent work, I have been committed to locating an *ethical media praxis*.¹ These writings, films, and practices that I study and link—discrete works of a theorized media practice committed to world and self changing—are central to my field, yet are usually left unassociated, unlinked, not interrelated. This lack of recognition evidences, as I hope my biographical musings below will demonstrate in greater detail, that my field, although imminently suited to model movements between people, places, and practices in the name of politics, is not nearly as interconnected as I had hoped, and as scholars in other fields might imagine. For reasons I will detail soon, which perhaps are familiar to those of you in other fields, even the newer interdisciplinary fields born in tandem with the movements for social justice of the 1960s did not prove to be as radical as their initial aims or the progressive players who people them. Film studies as an academic discipline and procedure for training and vetting is rarely a *praxis*, even as it studies objects and methods that are. Theory and practice are taught in tandem in merely a handful of select and marginal settings (Pitzer Media Studies, where I teach, is one of these). And although the majority of professors and students in the field claim to be “political” and often situate themselves and their work in and around ideas of social justice, this has not radically remade the work and workings of my interdisciplinary field. An (inter)discipline like any other, media studies is not a model for the best ethical and political possibilities of interdisciplinarity for social justice, even though it should be in that we mostly stay put in the isolated places, procedures, practices, and politics of the academy that houses and pays us.

In the following two-part presentation, I will exhibit two ways of knowing and saying what we might learn about the four further-inters from, first, a personal and then a theoretical consideration of the interdisciplinary tradition of *media praxis*. In part 1, I do not set out to provide a complete or even an accurate history of my young field (fortunately, there is a recent spate of writing looking at the field's formation that has been highly informative to my thinking here²), nor do I engage in traditional

scholarly writing or research authoritatively validating my claims about the politics and social justice concerns of the early years of the interdisciplinary fields I describe. Rather, I attempt to create the feelings, moods, and personal motivations that brought me and many others to interdisciplinarity and other tactics within the academy in pursuit of social justice as experienced during a period when it seemed that the academy just might be remaking itself toward such ends. This section is my private, but perhaps demonstrative and sometimes political, story of scholarly experiments, disappointments, and obstacles toward academic labor in pursuit of social justice. In part 2, I partake in more traditional academic writing about more traditional academic research to explain what I have deduced from one such scholarly project toward social justice. I hope this split structure contributes to my overall project by both modeling the effects of engaging multiple vernaculars and ways of knowing and marking how method and style create signs of expertise as well as their willful abandonment. And I hope my inter-duction to the ideas of *media praxis* commences an interaction with scholars in other interdisciplines.

Part I: A Private History Toward an Ethical Media Praxis

In the early to mid-1980s, I was a college student at an elite New England liberal arts college that had only quite recently gone coed. That place was cold, gray, and super-preppy; its traditions of beer swilling and erudite, stoic athleticism were both compelling and repulsive to this budding feminist from the hinterlands of Colorado. I entered the academy at an exciting time—repulsion and attraction, tradition and its destruction all evident and in lively play—when the radical, interdisciplinary fields called into being in the 1960s and 1970s (women's, ethnic, film studies) began to evidence early manifestations of professionalization, institutionalization, and sedimentation. From where I entered, these ways of thought, and the places and people associated with them, seemed legitimate, sanctioned, and downright cool: they had offices, acolytes, and textbooks; esteemed professors discussed the newest independent art, the trickiest continental theory, and uncharted realms of unseemly practices, personal experiences, and visions of a better world. At my small, secluded college, a strong and exuberant minority of scholars and students set about calling for new traditions by challenging the old ways of college, scholarship, and disciplines. The resultant battles about how and what to think and what we might need (or demand) to do

so (departments, professors, radical methods, safe spaces) were hard-won and probably as often lost. My beloved feminist teacher and mentor was refused tenure, it seemed, for driving to work from a point midway between her job and her husband's (she is now an esteemed full professor at Yale); I sat on the committee that brought women's and gender studies to the college. At this time, and perhaps even more excitingly, I learned from and participated in the early tremors of what would be a later batch of radical interdisciplinary fields (queer, media, and cultural studies) as they began exhibiting signs of their emergence. For example, two of my closest friends wrote undergraduate theses on gay or lesbian themes in literature, both firsts supported by radical gay and lesbian professors inventing the field.

At the same time, I often joined with progressive students and faculty on campus who were organizing around the lived experiences of community members who felt disenfranchised by the elitist, old-guard, preppy values of the institution: its tail-gate parties, its faculty with only one female full professor, and endless tokenization. We formed a support group for gay and lesbian students (one year, my friends Jim and Hali were the only out gay students at the entire college, so there weren't enough "gay" students or faculty to form a group on their own). We demanded sexual harassment policy with sit-ins, then successfully closed down the fraternities, with their hundred-plus-year histories of exclusion and bad behavior. I like to say that I learned to be an activist at Amherst College; and I believe that it is true. In this safe, wealthy, conservative, and isolated institution—where infractions were glaring and support was plentiful (intelligent, political professors; guilty, deep-pocketed administrators)—we named problems, and then their solutions were often forthcoming. I have also long traced my commitment to the inter to this time and place, for here, my developing political commitments were buttressed by elegant bodies of thought and their equally eloquent spokespeople who together were focused on interdisciplinary questions and their associated world changes.

But with hindsight, I realize that our practices of idea and world changing, or in the terms of this volume, interdisciplinarity and social justice, although intellectually and politically linked, were not fully integrated. The inter was evidenced in new relations between academic traditions but was not functioning as a path that connected these new ways of knowing to alternative methods, places, or goals of doing. For we fought about ideas in class; later, we "hit the streets" and other real-world sites like the president's office, faculty meetings, or the town commons to combat policies and practices. Although each sphere certainly informed the other, there was

a decided break in setting, protocol, language, tactics, and forms of affirmation between our intellectual-political work and our material-political work. I do not recall anyone noting or caring about this rupture in the inter.

However, thinking back, I find that I was already making small gestures toward opening or perhaps connecting these different avenues of ideological action, as others must have been as well. I was keen to trouble what constituted the proper voice, method, and practice for the many audiences and goals we hoped to reach. I was ready to learn what might be the effect if we shook things up. Thus, in my senior year, emboldened by the theoretical challenges of feminist film theory and the lived changes exhibited in lesbian-feminist Western Massachusetts, I stepped far outside my comfort zone as smart-girl, book-girl, girl-intellectual and took an art class (at Hampshire, of course!); a film class, to be exact. I touched material that I had considered only with my mind and eyes; I stretched timidly to express myself through abstraction and affect rather than rhetoric alone. And then I pushed my Amherst professors (who readily agreed, although this was most likely the first such request) and dared to turn in my first super-8 film (about film's relation to memory and desire) and my first black-and-white video (about the unique and interrelated power of the sound and audio tracks) as assignments for my academic classes. Of course, it wasn't far—although it felt like forever—to move across campuses, between ways of knowing and among technologies of communication. I am well aware that this stretch, although personally monumental, is almost embarrassingly mundane, especially situated as it was in this particular location of privilege and safety. But we might want to consider these glaring inconsistencies of scale (something so small feeling so significant) as some of the definitive terms and struggles of self changing within the academy—itsself a fundamental first step toward world changing, or social justice.

Ever Onward to Theory and Praxis

This work felt exciting and potentially important, and I was driven to continue such pursuits. So, immediately following my undergraduate education, I went on to graduate school in New York City in the field of cinema studies, because I hoped that this was an intellectual location likely to support and further my burgeoning commitment to integrating the doing and thinking of something in the name of changing something else. Namely, I decided that I wanted to think about and make film in

the pursuit of feminist politics. Quickly, my life and times brought me to AIDS as well. Cinema studies, a relatively new discipline with strong and evident ties to the Marxist, feminist, antiracist, and post-structuralist political/intellectual traditions of cultural studies in England and women's studies in the United States, was a lucky bet. However, by the mid-1980s, and because of the all-too-predictable restrictive effects of disciplines and the conservative institutions that house them, the political nature of all of these interdisciplines, although still formative ideologically (in the disciplines' sense of themselves and what they stood for) were not being as richly evidenced through a consistent tradition of related intellectual, institutional, or social practices. Yes, I stretched my institution to allow me to make media about and for movements for social justice as my "academic" work. But my program, and discipline, were never so organized. Yes, I found those loving professors and supportive administrators who were open to my (at that time) relatively unique requests to make intellectual videos for academic assignments and to use my AIDS activist political video project as my doctoral research (although not my dissertation—I still had to write a regular 250-page opus in addition to my extensive real-world art activities). But, really, we were asked to learn this radical interdiscipline like any other: through the academy's tried-and-true structures of training, expertise, performance, judgment, and tradition (no matter how short-lived). No one seemed to mind that much. This was the 1980s, after all, the sixties no longer, and even the most radical of my feminist, queer, Marxist, antiracist professors and fellow students had quieted down, not in the sense of their words, but surely in their actions and activities, at least on campus.

Beyond the times themselves and the effects of a growing and ever-more-sanctioned body of work and workers, there was another significant contributor to this sense of calcification, one that against its own stated interests served to tame the once-radical interdisciplines that had been organized around social justice, interdisciplines that had been initially hell-bent on rethinking the production and dissemination of knowledge within higher education, that had been founded on a linking of the interpretation and changing of culture because of stated ideological commitments. At least as I experienced it, it was a particular form of disciplining the interdisciplines that coincided with the American academy's discovery and subsequent headlong, giddy pursuit of "theory" as an isolated, invigorating, thought-and-political object in its own right. And really, given how hard and new it was and that it was expressed through specialist languages

from intellectual traditions in which none of us were (initially) trained (philosophy, psychoanalysis, semiotics), we had to work really hard at it. It became difficult to find the time and energy for anything else; it felt good to master it; it explained some of the political concepts that we wanted to understand; and, as an ancillary bonus, it authorized our interdisciplines through a (new) master's language, although oddly enough, this was one thing that most of the radical interdisciplines had set out to challenge. Let's face it, it's hard to ever do your work at the mocked and substandard margin. But there I was, repulsed and enthralled again; supported and held back in my inter-aims.

Frankly, I am finding this rather hard to express with subtlety, and that feels scary. I imagine it might sound like I'm engaging in a knee-jerk reaction to "theory," which is anything but the case. I do hope my commitment to "theory" will be evidenced in the second part of this essay, for the invigorating tradition of media praxis attests to just how "theory" is a necessity for our social justice work, in and out of the academy. But theory, quite simply, is not politics—particularly social justice work—until it is made material through practice in interconnected places, through multiple vernaculars, actions, and outputs. In fact, in isolation, even the most radical political theory that is set to thinking the opposite can serve to close doors between disciplines, among and between specialist and nonspecialist audiences and across the divide that separates where and how we work in the academy from the social justice work that we are committed to in the world.

Of course, the call to praxis—to integrate theory, practice, and politics—is not mine, nor is it new, or even radical, that is to say, in its idea form, as theory. In fact, this was precisely what I was being taught by my radical professors and teachers (at this time I was also attending the Whitney Independent Studio program, where my instructors were world-renowned conceptual artists) who were engaged in the decade(s)-old intellectual, institutional, and political project at the heart of the interdisciplines. What I now come to understand as idiosyncratic about my experience was not the desire to engage in praxis, but my interest for this to be realized within an integrated professional practice where all aspects of this work (ideas, artistic expression, real-world application) were equally valued and supported. Quite simply, the intellectual scaffolding for a media praxis far predates the institutional one; or, to state it another way, it seems easier to change ideas than institutions.

On Institutions, Favored Practices, Neo-Liberalism, and Nostalgia

What I found as a graduate student attempting to engage in undersupported inters, and what I still find, is that the institutional needs for the evaluation of employees and their labor and practices, the professional demands for specialization, and the individual's interests in or capabilities to be poly-vocal are all strong forces limiting such movements toward social justice across, between, and among. As we all know, the academy and its humanities and social science disciplines are sites where we are paid to think, write, and talk, using standardized methods and vocabularies, referring to and being authorized by similarly structured traditions, with our result being words spoken or written. We are trained, and then go on to mark our expertise, precisely through the ways that our language is removed from common parlance, casual thinking, and daily practices. Furthermore, most people are drawn to the academy, and academic labor, precisely because we are good at, and like, speaking in and thinking through rarified, intellectual, specialized language. We are smart people who are rewarded for how quickly and adeptly we master and mobilize such traditions. Meanwhile, other ways of knowing, through the touch and feel, the sensuous engagement with the material world of humans and objects, falls outside what we might do. As intellectuals, we are, by definition, neither artists nor activists: Both are similarly formalized, professionalized languages and traditions, albeit based as often in experiential, accessible, and affective structures as theoretical ones. These separate traditions are also fields of distinction. When we also choose to work as artists or activists, these are activities that occur in isolated spheres, using a separate vernacular, practices that are construed by those who judge our work as hobbies. We produce our real work in conversation with but not across, between, or among such spheres because the inter would demand multiple trainings and intelligences, varied practices, products, and modes of evaluation, not to mention the truly radical possibilities of undoing, rethinking, or combining such forms of discipline.

Certainly the picture that I draw, for means of demonstration, is much too rigid. It is at once absurd but also somehow true. We all know plenty of professors who are poly-vocal in their classrooms, publications, and political actions, who expertly combine and interact. However, it is my contention that such individuals do so by struggling, usually alone or with a small group of allies, against the disciplinary procedures of their

institutions and fields. Each inter-act is exceptional, like my own, spelled out above; there is little institutional, structural, or even social support. To go inter is to go it alone; on our backs we carry our inter-load until we tire. Of course, one can build a tradition and even a field from such isolated practices (this is evidenced in my *Media Praxis* project discussed below), just as we all build alliances of like-minded colleagues. However, I attest that this group, and its histories, traditions, and needs, remains marginal, isolated, and embattled within the academy during, or because of, the changing nature of our work in this profession in this country and during the last few years.

As the public sphere in America shrinks in direct proportion to the gains of the market, so that the academy becomes one of the last places where one can actually engage in pursuits beyond capital, the academy itself becomes increasingly regulated by the logic of the market. Now workers within our industry have even less freedom to engage in the inventive practices of praxis, and those few who remain capable of doing so (because of tenure or other waning forms of institutional support) are reduced to quaint holdouts enacting what is perceived as a politically correct but retrograde vision of a better world (and academy) that never did come to pass. We serve as the institution's conscience: wacky hippie holdouts, angry scholars of color, hip queer activists, groovy women-of-colorists, aging socialists. You know the cast of characters: we strange but noble bedfellows, sometimes aligned, other times fighting over the same tired piece of pie, while the rest of our colleagues and students treat us as quaint nostalgic specters, dying out fast, and necessarily appeased and quieted until we stop reproducing. The ideas we stand for are beyond debate, holy even: Who among us could be against social justice, interdisciplinarity, or personal dignity? Meanwhile, the institution questions, challenges, and then quietly closes down the inter-spaces we had tentatively unlocked. Talk to graduate students uncertain they will ever have a job, let alone tenure, and it is understandable why adventurous attacks against structural discipline become more and more anomalous.

On Doing, Making, Teaching, Process, Ethics, and Inter-Action

So what is left? First, there is always teaching. If one considers that praxis means an integrated doing and thinking toward world and self changing,

the classroom can be constituted as an ideal site for doing and talking, as well as a stable place from which to depart. Across American higher education, there are exciting models for community-based learning with growing traditions of their own. At its best, this pedagogy is inter in all the ways I have mentioned, forging alliances across, between, and among critical thinking, accessible language, lived experience, social justice, multiple locations, complex communities, and a range of practices that are most appropriate for the task(s) at hand. This kind of teaching is exhilarating and exhausting.

Then there is interaction. Maintaining across a career the kinds of pedagogic invention necessitated by social justice work demands another kind of inter: that we need to work with and teach each other. Models of collaboration that emphasize the unmaking or sharing of expertise and power are critical to engaging in such work. Thus conversations that unthink the rhetoric of specialization are key, just as are practices and theories that unmake the sanctified art or intellectual object. Artists need to teach scholars, and activists need to instruct intellectuals. The members of communities with whom we interact, when leaving the academy, need to teach us their local knowledge. However, the process of engaging as we must across, between, and among places, ways of knowing and speaking, and their varied practices, and always with real-world ends in mind, alters (and makes much more difficult) the logic of our academic labor and training. There are different stakes when varied groups of people engage together in projects for social justice. Thus we must think about and then engage in ethical behavior that takes into account power differences within, between, and across the classroom and the people and places of the outside world. This, in turn, raises questions of process: How we teach, what happens in the classroom and world, and how we interact are as important as what we teach; in fact, they are often what we teach. Here, our interdisciplinarity must be augmented by traditions of radical pedagogy with their own histories and theories that emphasize critical thinking, power sharing, and ethics.

As an uncertain conclusion, I would like to raise a few questions that have been critical lately in my classroom as I attempt to engage an ethical media praxis with my students and across, between, and among our starting place in the academy and the activist communities within which we also are members.

Perhaps you have the specialist knowledge to help me think these through. Then, we need to talk. I will happily share what I know about video (see below). I find these questions troubling:

What counts for the *doing* part of the praxis equation if one's primary labor is thinking and talking?

Because the academy is without question in and of the world, is change within this institution—its classrooms, traditions, disciplines—and/or within the realm of ideas, world and self changing in its own right?

In the end, are these merely question of technologies (the word, the pen, the camera, the computer); output (lecture, paper, book, video, Web site, action); intention (interaction with my production leads to contemplation or action); audience (whom do I want to hear me?); or affirmation (how will I be judged and by whom)?

Although I am not yet satisfied with my own answers, I have found a hundred-year history of media praxis to be quite informative about such questions. Some of what I have learned as student and practitioner of this tradition is what follows.

Part 2: Media Praxis

I have been working for several years on a project called *Media Praxis: A Radical Website Integrating Theory, Politics, and Production* (www.mediapraxis.org), which is an online interactive archive of media and theory by committed artists, intellectuals, and activists making use of the best writing and media work from the hundred-year history of the media arts to consider the role of digital media in contemporary social change. Here's Jean-Luc Godard raising the gauntlet:

JLG: Art is a Special gun. Q: How do you explain the camera as a gun? JLG: Well, ideas are guns. A lot of people are dying from ideas and dying for ideas. A gun is a practical idea. And an idea is a theoretical gun.

Theorists and makers of Third Cinema, Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas, give us a production tip:

The cinema of revolution is at the same time one of destruction and construction: destruction of the image that neo-colonialization

has created of itself and us, and construction of a throbbing, living reality which recaptures truth in its expression.

And philosopher and filmmaker, Trinh T. Minh-ha, keeps the boys in check:

The socially oriented filmmaker is thus the almighty voice giver (here I, a vocalizing context that is all-male), whose position of authority in the production of meaning continues to go unchallenged, skillfully masked as it is by its righteous mission.

On this site, many more inspiring, thoughtful, and self-aware words from linked traditions of revolutionary media are supplemented by and connected to a range of information, including contextual information written by scholars, images, and words from related political projects and links to living communities of authors and artists bent on considering and using digital media toward social justice. At its core, the site is a repository of media theory written by film, video, and digital producers engaged in changing the world. "You couldn't stay neutral in Madrid," theorizes Joris Ivans about his resulting filmic (and related distribution and organizing) methods connected to his film, *Spanish Earth*, which documents the delinquencies of the Spanish Civil War. On the Web site, Ivans will share space with ethnographic film scholar and maker David MacDougall, who, sixty years later, while living and working with Australian aborigines, writes about and makes media keen to keep the offenses of cross-cultural power relations in our sight lines: "The real crime of representation is representation itself."

As is true for MacDougall (and perhaps less so for Ivans), most of what can be read here already has been canonized in textbooks of the discipline of media studies—from Sergei Eisenstein to Laura Mulvey, Maya Deren to David MacDougall—but these seminal theoretical productions have heretofore been considered in isolation from each other: as either the hallowed words of a great director allowing scholars access to behind-the-scenes minutiae, or as part of a national or genre tradition. When I understand them as part of an unheralded tradition of media praxis, these voices speak as they have not before, among and to other political filmmakers, as well as to the discrete historical/political movements from which they were initially produced; they speak across time, between regions, and among radical philosophies and practices. Thus, for example, the experi-

mental films and ideas of the New American Cinema of the 1940s to 1960s, set to jettison middle-class conformity, seem impossibly far away from the ethnographic theories and films of the 1970s and 1980s, set to revision the world's primitives, which already seems more than a lifetime away from the contemporary concerns generated by neoliberal globalization. Yet by realizing affinities across political, global, and chronological landscapes, a picture of cinema and of cinema history emerges that is optimistic, anti-corporate, agitational, intelligent, and as often as not gendered female and multicultural. Although many theoretical traditions are mined (structuralism, psychoanalysis, feminism, critical race, postmodern), the centrality of Marxist thinking within this tradition is notable, especially considering its absence elsewhere in contemporary cultural production and conversation.

Yet posting these texts together and learning from their affirming allegiances and dramatic debates is an intradisciplinary project of merely the first order. Cementing the legitimacy, value, and power of this as a theoretical tradition is merely the first step. On the Internet we can move beyond text, and thus past contemplation, and the reification of great words and images on a screen. Thus this new technology furthers the work of the inter (as might a classroom) because it creates a context for reading, writing about, and viewing political media as a step toward action and interaction and, ideally, better-informed media making. When I teach with the site it serves to both evidence and inspire *praxis*, the organic integration of theory (thinking) and practice (doing) when one's aims are political (changing).

Since cinema's invention, artists committed to social transformation have engaged in *media praxis*: the using and theorizing of various media toward world and self changing. Although I understand this to be a radical tradition in that it directly refers to what Marx, in *Theses on Feuerbach*, calls "revolutionary practice," the project of interpreting and changing the world, my Web site is equally radical in that it makes a demand on my self-consciously (and self-righteously) interdisciplinary discipline, media studies, to account for theoretical and political consequences of the highly enforced boundaries it continues to raise—between theory, practice, and politics—even as the field was founded on a radical critique of the traditional disciplines. In other words, although cinema, and later, media studies, like women's or race studies, was founded in a 1960s challenge to disciplinary and institutional structures and hierarchies—openly contesting *who* might make a proper academic, *what* she might properly study, and what questions she might rightfully ask—there are some structures and hierarchies that have remained too unseemly to breach. In my highly interdisciplinary field, one

that could be said to be largely invented and populated by feminists and other politicized scholars who look to popular culture to ask of it questions about power, injustice, and ideology, we have all but disavowed praxis. Bringing praxis to the fore of the analytic and practical project—making a commitment to a linked doing *and* thinking of social justice—is the aim of this essay and my career's body of work.

Marx calls for "sensuous human activity" as well as contemplation, "changing of circumstances" and "self-changing"—production in real life and within the life of the mind that creates change in consciousness and lived conditions. *Feuerbach*, and the theoretical legacy it produced, fosters the hopeful position that some human activity might not simply reproduce but could transform social existence in society. The legacy of a philosophy of praxis has emboldened filmmakers throughout cinema's hundred-year history to include media work as revolutionary practice within larger struggles for social transformation. Although all of the arts have seen great works produced through an integrated practice and theory—praxis—the history of the media arts has most neatly paralleled the political, technological, and economic demands of modern and postmodern revolution. In 1922, Lenin informed his minister of culture, "You must remember that of all the arts for us the most important is the cinema." But early Soviet cinema is not the exception, even as it is the most heralded of such convergences; rather, the explicit linking of art, culture, revolution, and philosophy has inspired a great many of the seminal works and theories of media history.

Media Praxis demonstrates that a pursuit of revolutionary practice within the media has been an ongoing experiment and inspiration responsible for many of the decisive ideas and works of film history. By linking these texts, I vehemently attest to an ongoing project, indebted to Marxist theories of ideology, that links culture, theory, and politics in the twentieth century through mediation technologies. In the process, I tell other stories: of field formation, the institutionalization of knowledge production, and the delegitimization of the ideas of media producers, even within the very field that honors them. Also told is the often-silenced story of a modernity that was just as political as it was aesthetic, that was text *and* earth bound.

I have organized the Web site (as well as the class that inspired it) into ten chronological moments where media is theorized as a vital component of political struggle. For those who are not film scholars, I believe you will surely recognize these revolutionary moments, if not their associated film traditions. The tradition begins with the years shortly after the Russian revolution, then moves to the Popular Front in France, Germany

and the United States in the 1930s, the beatniks and underground denizens of American bohemia in the 1940s and 1950s, the decolonization of the Third World in the 1960s, France and the United Kingdom in 1968, feminism and the black Atlantic of the 1970s, AIDS in the 1980s, and cyberspace bringing us up to the present. The collection of theory I draw differs from others in ways that demonstrate how even the new academic interdisciplines, like media studies, maintain certain restrictions that limit their clearly stated commitments to social justice.

For instance, *Media Praxis* demonstrates a filmmakers' ontology of film: what filmmakers know and learn about the medium they shoot, edit, and project because they engage in its sensuous activity. Writing in neither interviews nor memoirs, the theory of practitioners challenges the distinction typically drawn between those capable of and qualified to make systematic claims about the media (its theorists) and those whose ruminations are about the particular, daily, and technical (its producers). I am not the first to note that this bifurcation, in and of itself, leads to a "theoretical crisis." The founding of media, cultural, and minority studies in the 1960s and 1970s was rooted in an energizing political and theoretical investment in practice, daily activity, the personal, and the political. "Now I think the true crisis in cultural theory, in our time, is between this view of the work of art as object and the alternative of art as a practice," writes Raymond Williams in the 1950s in "Marxist Cultural Studies," one of the theoretical contributions that led to the invention of cultural studies. He continues: "What this can show us here about the practice of analysis is that we have to break from the common procedure of isolating the object and then discovering its components. On the contrary we have to discover the nature of a practice and then its conditions."

A significant number of the writers in the media praxis tradition seek to understand less the isolated object, the aesthetics and formal structures of film, than they do the nature of its practice and its conditions: what happens when it is made, seen, and used and how to do this effectively in pursuit of real-world goals. Certainly, if one makes film with a social rather than a monetary or aesthetic goal, its "self-changing" capacities—to enable makers and viewers to see and know the world and themselves differently—require the greatest attention. Thus, in this writing, the film object is often refracted through theories of collective production and radical reception. Theories and practices bent on transforming receivers of culture into its producers are as ubiquitous as analyses of who is authorized, educated, and entitled to produce a society's art and ideas. In this

way, political-economic considerations regarding access to both authorship and media education are also definitive. Celebrations and concerns about technology abound. Writes Dziga Vertov: "Kino-eye as the possibility of making the invisible visible, the unclear clear, the hidden manifest, the disguised overt, the acted non-acted; making falsehood into truth." The role and nature of the personal, pleasure, and the political is also addressed. Here is avant-garde filmmaker Jonas Mekas:

The park scene, and the city scene, and the tree—it's all there, on film—but it's not what I saw the moment I was filming it! The image is there, but there is something very essential missing. I got the surface, but I missed the essence. At that time I began to understand that what was missing from my footage was myself: my attitude, my thoughts, my feelings in the moment I was looking at the reality that I was filming.

Feminists then made collective and political this move towards the personal. Laura Mulvey writes:

The alternative is the thrill that comes from leaving the past behind without simply rejecting it, transcending outworked or oppressive forms, and daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire.

Across time, a growing concern with identity (politics) can also be seen, as can a move toward politicizing what we now call globalization, as movements for social justice become increasingly conceptualized cross-culturally. Says Pratibha Parmar, "As Asian women we have to place ourselves in the role of subjects creatively engaging in constructing our own images based both in our material and social conditions and in our visions and imaginations." Although the film movements from the first half of the century are rooted in local, often national struggles for change in what might be understood as the base, a noteworthy change occurs in the sixties, when cross-cultural, global, or mobile identity-based (and thus superstructural) politics of representation and personal liberation take dominance.

Yet all of the theory in this tradition depends on the Marxist philosophical assumptions that cultural production can contribute to social change, that popular culture is a viable site of education and action, and that the media are the realm where ideology is active and adaptable. "The open secret of the electronic media, the decisive political factor, which has been waiting,

suppressed or crippled, for its moment to come," writes Hans Magnus Enzenberger, "is their mobilizing power." Most of these theorist-filmmakers attempt to prove how the media are ideal for this work and how the artist-intellectual is the worker best suited for this kind of labor toward the struggle. The writing is also supremely self-referential: theorizing praxis itself (how do ideas exist in an action, and how is this related to the project of radical pedagogy?); calling into question the conditions, apparatuses, forms, and processes of the authors' production; questioning their roles as bourgeois intellectuals and/or trained artists. Not surprisingly, a dialectical approach organizes much of the thought found here: base/superstructure, form/content, truth/obstruction. Sergei Eisenstein explains: "In *The Strike* we have the first instance of revolutionary art where the form has turned out to be more revolutionary than the content. . . . [This is] established in formal terms through the construction of a logical antithesis to the bourgeois West, which we are in no way *emulating* but which we are in every way *opposing*." Following the lead of the Soviets, most of these theorists argue for radical engagements with form and content. This debate, as is also true in media studies more generally, is often waged through opposing commitments to montage or (socialist) realist practices. Thus, theories of realism, documentary, and truth abound.

Some years later, deconstruction joins the theoretical landscape and serves to expand or empty out such binary conflicts. Peter Wollen suggests:

The cinema cannot show the truth or reveal it because the truth is not out there in the real world waiting to be photographed. What the cinema can do is produce meanings, and meanings can be plotted, not in relation to some abstract yardstick or criterion of truth, but in relation to other meanings.

Then Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien add race, nationality, and ethnicity to the deconstructed configuration:

What is in question is not the expression of some lost origin or some uncontaminated essence in black film-language but the adoption of a critical voice that promotes consciousness of the collision of cultures and histories that constitute our very conditions of existence.

Later yet, gender-radical and cyber-guru Rosanne Allacquer Stone blows the subject apart:

The boundaries between the subject, if not the body, and the "rest of the world" are undergoing a radical refiguration, brought about in part through the mediation of technology.

Who better to theorize the nature and rationale of a practice than its practitioners? And why is this most obvious truism such a bitter pill? When considering the writing of the "great" theorist/makers of film history, cinema studies at once embraces their messy, hands-on, ideologically motivated practice, but only as a kind of romantic fetish, not as a viable or learnable practice. But what is threatened here? Perhaps for the majority of film scholars whose ideas about film come from their heads alone, there is the fear that their theories will be proven inadequate in the field. "The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question," cautions Marx. Perhaps for the discipline, one that moved so quickly from margin to center, its legacy of both partisan politics and hands-on practice must be closeted like so much dirty linen. Serious academic disciplines must claim a theoretical, not a political lineage at their core. Just as women's colleges maintain the most thoroughly functional closet in academia (if you think we have too many lesbians here, you're right, so we're all going to live and work painfully maintaining we don't, at great cost to us individually, but to benefit the institution we love), cinema studies has ever-so-subtly secreted away its direct debt to the intellectual-practitioner who is inspired by moral indignation and political crusade.

Yet dreams of political and social change (of the world and academia) were fundamental to the field's formation, not just to the films and writings it considers. Leftists, feminists, and others engaged in and emboldened by a Marxist, post-structuralist critique of education, the arts, and culture created new fields that challenged what could be studied, by whom, and for what ends. That, for instance, a *woman* professor could engage in *dialogue* with *female* students about a *popular* film to help them see how *sexism* is structured into the very ways of looking of our culture, so that these students could imagine and *remake* themselves as men and women, was in its time *radical* media praxis. In one of a series of anthologized essays in *Reinventing Film Studies*, an anthology dedicated to remembering and rethinking the formation of this academic field, Tessa Perkins points to the repression of such messy beginnings: "In this crisis both the contributions of theory and the place (or not) of politics have played a significant role—to the extent that some wish, to all intents and purposes, to abandon both, and others

are determined that the former should cleanse itself of all contamination by the latter, fantasizing, perhaps, that a pseudoscientific objectivity will emerge from the funeral pyre." But thirty years later, as cinema and media studies enter their maturity, it seems that the proper place of, and relation between, theory, practice, and politics has been settled. Cinema and media studies are, first, scholarly, in that they apply pseudoscientific theories to texts; then political, in that a relation between text and culture is foundational to the field; and only nominally practical, in that media scholars will occasionally consider the work of making media (by its producer) as itself related to the texts under scrutiny, whereas consideration of any practical component to their own work would be, of course, taboo.

I strive to challenge media studies' tautological advancement toward theory abstracted from politics and practice. I look beyond what political artists think of their craft and medium to what they express about politics, ideology, and culture. Again, this murking up of roles and specialties, although attractive to postmodernists and even interdisciplinarians in the abstract, remains surprisingly threatening to scholars in the flesh. For a discipline that formed itself around the breakdown of more traditional boundaries, objects, and methods of study, there is a remarkable clarity in the production and maintenance of our education. Fears abound: about vocational training, soft thinking, creativity. (Media Studies students on the 6th Floor, Film Production above; scholars at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, makers at the College Art Association.) Even as our materialist forefathers fought for a link to everyday activity, our bosses in the academy want work created in the traditional, removed ways. In another essay from *Reinventing Film Studies*, Gill Branston provides the answer: "Oddly, such very contemporary emphases meld with the histories of Western academic theorizing. . . . This is echoed in the gendered and classed language with which 'theory' is often justified: said to possess 'rigor,' 'proper distance/objectivity' as opposed to the 'emotion' and 'instinct' of raw encounters with the object of study."

Such conservative tendencies for a field that heralds its birth as revolutionary! In the same collection, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith writes, "The revolution which took place in film studies in the 1970s was, to use the jargon of the time, highly over-determined. It had a significant political dimension, spun off from the radicalism of 1968. Philosophically it vaunted its materialism, in opposition to idealism of every kind." I came to my graduate education in cinema in the 1980s, drawn to this revolutionary field "representing the point at which theory, politics and the academy

intersect." It was these intersections that distinguished the field, its method and objects; this linkage that made media and cultural studies so exciting, relevant, and radical; this association that is ever more repressed within an ever more institutionalized discipline.

In the 1980s, I was a graduate student at NYU and an AIDS activist video maker. I was supported to write my dissertation about a media movement in which I was an active participant. In that work, *AIDS TV: Identity, Community and Alternative Video*, and in later projects where I made and theorized feminist or queer film as part of those political movements, I also place myself as a participant in the very tradition of media praxis I map in this article. I also do so in my teaching and program building, where I ask my students to think about, make, and use media in ways and places that matter. I name my place, and that of my students and institution, in this history not to mark our prowess, but quite the opposite, for media praxis focuses on what we theorize and learn about the media when commitment and engagement are more valued than artistic genius. I make video—along with teaching, scholarly writing, and organizing—to speak with different audiences, in multiple settings, using a range of tactics, so as to address real-world conditions that matter to me. To do so, I have been enabled by those who have done such work before me; I want to imagine participating in communities that continue to make such ideas and tactics relevant to our times and needs by learning from and adapting the prescient work of the past.

Yet in conclusion, although I will attest that my field has in many ways tried to closet me, as perhaps your field has closeted you, my field has as often supported me, as I hope yours supported you. This contradiction, and blurring of the boundaries I initially set out as calcified, seems important to consider. For I do work at an institution that has supported my interests in moving from theory to production to politics, and it has allowed me to take my students and program with me. And for the past twenty years I have made low-end media about feminist issues from teen sexuality to black lesbian identity that have been carefully linked to both social justice movements that can make use of these images and a scholarly community that considers committed media practices. Where I work, I have built, along with my fellow theorist-practitioner colleagues, a distinct program in media studies. I am most proud of my program's founding philosophies: a commitment to the integration of theory and practice; to an interdisciplinary approach to media studies; to teaching our students

the nonindustrial histories, applications, and values of the media; and a prioritizing of local and international community-based media.

Thus I cannot rightfully lambaste my discipline, or even the now-institutionalized interdisciplines, but instead I will signal the ways that the academy, and the theory and practices it upholds, both enable and restrain work committed to understanding and contributing to social justice. To denounce the academy in its totality would be false, unproductive, and diminishing of the project of praxis, one that includes the doing *and the thinking*. However, to celebrate the contesting of academic knowledge systems through the creation of our newer interdisciplines would be equally limited in that it fails to recognize what boundaries have become legitimate to break, like those across fields, and what boundaries are still taboo: those involving our bodies and the lives they lead in a world connected to but much bigger than our philosophies.

I hope *Media Praxis*, and this essay about it, will prompt us to know media theory and history not as something written on paper, the mark of some distant other's formidable mind, but as a thing that was made to be used and remade by us, in our world, toward what matters most. I want the theorizing that has been born from sensuous human engagement with the medium to be granted the central place it deserves in the history of the interdiscipline of media studies, and to also cross out of this discipline to enable those with other skills and expertise to learn from these impassioned, intelligent practices. This because I want to pass on and *make use of* the great and interlegacy of "revolutionary practice," a hundred-year-old project of interpreting *and* changing the world, so that present-day theorist makers can learn from and expand on these magnificent ideas to then contribute to the real-world changes that we all know must happen here, and soon, in this radically media-saturated world in great need of a counter, intelligent, angry, and artful media praxis.

Notes

1. Please see my teaching/research/action Web site <www.mediapraxis.org>.

2. Some of these recent publications on the history of film studies include Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (2000), Dana Polan (2007), and B. Ruby Rich (1998).

Works Cited

- Branston, Gill. "Why Theory?" *Reinventing Film Studies*. Ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams. New York: Arnold, 2000. 18–33.
- Getino, Octavio, and Fernando Solanas. "Towards a Third Cinema." *New Latin American Cinema*. vol. 1. Ed. Michael Martin. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1997. 33–58.
- Gledhill, Christine, and Linda Williams, eds. *Reinventing Film Studies*. New York: Arnold, 2000.
- Godard, Jean-Luc. Audio interview. *San Francisco Express Times* 14 Mar. 1968: 8–9.
- Ivans, Joris. *The Camera and I*. New York: International Publishers, 1969.
- Lunacharsky, Anatoli. "Conversation with Lenin, II: Newsreel and Fiction Film." *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents*. Ed. Richard Taylor. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994.
- MacDougall, David. *Transcultural Cinema*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988.
- Marx, Karl. "Theses of Feuerbach." *The German Ideology*. New York: International Publishers, 1970. (Originally published 1947.) 121–23.
- Mekas, Jonas. "The Diary Film." *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. P. Adams Sitney. New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1987. 190–98.
- Mercer, Kobena, and Isaac Julien. "Introduction: De Margin and De Center." *Screen* 29.4 (1988): 3–10.
- Minh-ha, Trinh T. "Documentary Is/Not a Name." *October* 52 (Spring 1990): 76–97.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*. Ed. Patricia Erens. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991. 34–47.
- Nowell-Smith, Geoffrey. "How Films Mean, or from Aesthetics to Semiotics and Half-Way Back Again." *Reinventing Film Studies*. Ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams. New York: Arnold, 2000. 8–17.
- Parmar, Pratibha. "Hateful Contraries." *Queer Looks*. Ed. Martha Gever, John Greyson, and Pratibha Parmar. New York: Routledge, 1993. 289–93.
- Perkins, Tessa. "Who (and What) Is It for?" *Reinventing Film Studies*. Ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams. New York: Arnold, 2000. 76–96.
- Polan, Dana. *Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the US Study of Film*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2007.
- Rich, B. Ruby. *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1998.
- Stone, Roseanne Allacquer. "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?" *The Cybercultures Reader*. Ed. David Bell and Barbara Kennedy. New York: Routledge, 2000. 504–25.

- Vertov, Dziga. *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*. Ed. Annette Michelson. Berkeley: U of California P, 1984.
- Williams, Raymond. "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory." *Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks*. Ed. Meenakshi Durham and Douglas Kellner. London: Blackwell, 2001. 152–65.
- Wollen, Peter. "Godard and Counter Cinema: *Vent D'Est*." *Movies and Methods*. Ed. Bill Nichols. Berkeley: U of California P, 1985. 499–507.