

Aesthetic Practices and Politics in Media, Music, and Art

Performing Migration

**Edited by
Rocío G. Davis,
Dorothea Fischer-Hornung,
and Johanna C. Kardux**

**Aesthetic
Practices and Politics
in Media, Music, and Art**

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In Memoriam

Juan Bruce-Novoa

Cherished Friend—Distinguished Scholar

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Introduction

Aesthetic Practices and Politics in Media, Music, and Art

*Rocío G. Davis, Dorothea Fischer-Hornung,
and Johanna C. Kardux*

Current cultural practices invite us to consider the representation of migration beyond written texts. A decade into the twenty-first century, media culture has become a prime driving force in politics, culture, society, and everyday life. We can argue that the media—readily accessible to everyone—provide models for cultural perspectives and positions, and new forms of identity. In many ways the media have become today's dominant culture, with visual, aural/oral, and digital forms of media culture increasingly replacing book culture among large sectors of the world's urban population, requiring a fundamental revision of the notion of literacy. Media have also become prime constituents of socialization, with social-networking sites, blogs, Twitter, YouTube, and other similar vehicles shaping our lives in significant ways. Indeed, as Douglas Kellner maintains, media culture is more crucial than ever as a force that shapes our worldview:

Radio, television, film, and the other products of the culture industries provide the models of what it means to be male or female, successful or a failure, powerful or powerless. Media culture also provides the materials out of which many people construct their sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality, of 'us' and 'them.' Media culture helps shape the prevalent view of the world and deepest values: it defines what is considered good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil. Media stories and images provide the symbols, myths, and resources which help constitute a common culture for the majority of individuals in many parts of the world today.¹

Simultaneously, our world has become more transnational than ever: migration marks the experiences of increasing numbers of the world's population. Migration, with its attendant deterritorialization, has become one of the defining characteristics of the contemporary world. Innovative forms of media and art—movies, television series, television commercials, the Internet, art installations, photography, and comics, for example—suggest that the performance of migration in contemporary media, art, and music have become multilayered cultural products that demand renewed theoretical

frames for interpretation. However, as Russell King and Nancy Wood point out, the richly interdisciplinary fields of media studies and migration studies have rarely been studied together.² Given the overlaps between issues of (im)migration and media, we need to address how their interconnection has become part of our understanding of the world's global cities and, more important in the context of this volume, the paradigms through which we think about ethnicity and nation. If cultural representations intervene in collective beliefs, then art, media, and music clearly influence the ways the experience of migration is articulated and recalled, and thus directly and indirectly impact the development of public policy. These discourses not only present experiences and attitudes, but also create values that operate in shifting cultural and political environments.

Wood and King suggest that the media intervene in the migration process and its representation in three ways: (1) through the images transmitted from the destination country or by the global media, which then serves as a source of information for potential migrants; (2) media constructions of migration in the host country affect the kind of reception, the experience of inclusion or exclusion, migrants encounter; and (3) because of new global distribution strategies, media originating from the home country play a dynamic role in the increasingly transcultural identity and politics of diaspora communities.³ This invites us to think of how art, media, and music support processes of what might be considered a form of cosmopolitanism, understood as a way of imagining and forming communities across national borders and cultural boundaries. As a way of envisioning and representing migrants and their histories, these artistic products become iconic strategies of multilayered image making.

In the introduction to their volume *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media*, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam call for “polycentric media studies” and suggest we think in terms of “comparative or transnational multiculturalism, of relational studies that do not always pass through the putative center” of U.S. media.⁴ In this volume we would like to take up this challenge and move beyond concepts of the monocultural, illustrating how groups, not only in the U.S. but also in countries like Canada, Germany, Spain, Brazil, and India, to name a few of the areas covered in this volume, construct ethnic identities—the implications of being ‘foreign’ or ‘alien,’ the notions of homeland and hostland, the value of memory and meaning in the country migrated to and from—through media that are simultaneously local and global. The global flow of cultures, images, and capital elicits transnational, transcultural, and transdisciplinary approaches, which often also include battles over the control of cultural politics and capital. Images of imagined multicultural or transcultural communities are often packaged in mass-media tropes, thereby eliciting intense identification or goading equally intense resistance. These kinds of border crossings occur not only across nation-state borders but across disciplines as well, in texts and contexts within and across nation-states, cultural and

social borderlands. It is, as Mary Louise Pratt has demonstrated, in the contact zones between cultures that an enriching struggle among cultures enables a continuing process of cultural recreation and innovation.⁵ Concepts such as hybridity, *métissage*, and creolization, among numerous other cross-, inter-, and transcultural conceptualizations, attempt to account for what Homi K. Bhabha has called the “third space” of the circulation and transformation of culture—some emphasizing more the transformed object that is the product of cultural migrations, and others focusing more on the dynamic tension among the given elements entailed in the process.

If transnationalism can be defined as the processes by which populations on the move forge and sustain multistranded social relations that link their societies of origin to those of settlement, it is the media, music, and art that often play a defining role in building social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders. ‘Transmigrants’ frequently develop a vacillating concept of home, referring with changing emphasis to a sometimes more and sometimes less removed country of origin or to a sometimes less and sometimes more welcoming country of reception.⁶ Moreover, the successive images of the countries that these transmigrants consume—in advertising, television, or the Internet—lead them to continually revise previously accepted or remembered versions of their countries of origin and those of the present country of migration. Importantly, because of the democratization of many forms of media, they in turn increasingly participate in the continuing artistic dialogue that multiplies perspectives or visions of places, positions, and possibilities.

In imagined worlds distributed around the globe, according to Arjun Appadurai, social structures like birth, kinship, work, and leisure act as stabilizing factors in human experience but are also themselves affected by human mobility. Often it is within mediated representations of these very categories that ‘global neighborhoods’ of a transnational character develop. Several of Appadurai’s paradigmatic concepts are particularly fruitful in the analysis of the relationship of migration and media: the “ethnoscape” defines the particular landscape of moving persons who constitute the shifting world; the “technoscape” marks out the structures of global configurations of technology, moving at high speeds across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries; and “mediascapes” delineate the distribution of electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information, making large and complex repertoires of images, narratives, and ethnoscapes available to viewers throughout the world.⁷ Appadurai goes on to demonstrate how these new forms of electronically mediated communication are beginning to create “virtual neighborhoods,” beyond and across national borders within large-scale media and data networks.⁸

Thus, an “alternative cartography of social space,” of transitory migratory circuits, is created, resulting in transnational spaces envisioned as multisided imagined communities—very much in Benedict Anderson’s sense⁹—the boundaries of which stretch across borders.¹⁰ In this context,

media are often a source of agency, with migrants not only changed by the country to which they migrate but also in turn producing changes in the receiving country. In Kellner's words, "As the human adventure enter[ed] a new millennium, media culture continued to be a central organizing force in the economy, politics, culture, and everyday life."¹¹ Further, media in combination with global migrancy offer forms of resistance and transformation. As several essays in this volume attest, migrants often strategically use mass media, such as film and television, and the visual and performance arts to claim cultural space, social visibility, or a political voice. To understand, thus, the way our global world is being shaped and how these images further influence the way we understand or articulate our experiences, beliefs, positions, and policies, we need to consider the structural strategies and possibilities of the media.

Earlier versions of the chapters in this volume were originally presented at the 2008 biennial conference of the Society for Multi-Ethnic Studies: Europe and the Americas (MESEA), held at the Leiden University in the Netherlands. The conference theme, "Migration Matters: Immigration, Homelands, and Border Crossings," elicited a significant concentration on arts- and media-related presentations, testifying to the importance of reading new forms of the arts and media as complex artifacts that reflect processes of personal creativity in the context of the particular social and political discourses within which they are produced and received. Indeed, as the chapters show, the media and arts become a vital part of the dialectic of the production of these artifacts as they construct images that establish paradigms of symbolic representations. These paradigms are later reproduced and circulated, subjected to further revisions, enabling new forms for representing issues related to migration. In different ways, the chapters widen the ways these representations may be analyzed: attending to how issues of migration are performed in the context of political discourse; reading the enactment of nostalgia in trans- and interdisciplinary ways; inviting us to discuss how globalization and transnationalism make us rethink traditional borders between nation-states and disciplines; suggesting renewed definitions of notions such as 'home,' 'homeland,' 'exile,' 'migration,' 'immigration,' 'identity,' and 'ethnicity' within globalized and simultaneously localized ethno-, techno-, and mediascapes.

The chapters in Part I of this volume, entitled "Border Crossings and (Trans)nationalism in Film," discuss the ways in which, from the 1950s to the present, movies have performed migration in their representation of migrants and their histories of border crossings and attendant interethnic and interracial interaction and conflict. Whereas the earlier movies are produced within the context of the immigration nation (predominantly the U.S.) and represent the receiving culture's often ambivalent or conflicting responses to immigration, from the 1990s on filmmakers from the migrant communities or in the migrants' homelands have utilized film to intervene into the process of image making and contribute to the processes of

cultural transformation to which migration gives rise. Though their underlying ideological and political agendas regarding cultural and ethnic mixing may differ, the aesthetic practices of many of these movies foreground the cultural hybridization to which geographical and metaphorical border crossings give rise.

In the opening chapter, Juan Bruce-Novoa illustrates how early science fiction movies allegorically played out contemporary problems such as immigration. *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *The Thing from Another World*, two now-classic movies that were both released in 1951, offer opposing paradigms of U.S. attitudes toward immigration. While *Day* portrays the desirable aliens who contribute positively to the melting pot, *Thing* presents immigration as disastrous dehumanization through foreigners bent on undermining U.S. culture. In *Thing*, alien migration portends increased vigilance and reinforced borders, whereas in *Day*, the future belongs to marginal peoples who traverse borders to receive the alien's message of global cooperation. *Thing* communicates jingoistic nationalism; *Day*, idealistic internationalism. Although these movies were a response to international and post-World War II issues such as U.S. policy toward the human rights of migrating peoples and capitalist industry's demands for both cheap and highly skilled foreign labor, the opposing attitudes toward immigration that they portray still persist today.

The subsequent chapters in this section discuss a wide variety of films that use the crossing of geographical boundaries, particularly the paradigmatic U.S.-Mexican border, to explore psychological, cultural, and metaphysical 'borderlands.' Taking Orson Welles's *A Touch of Evil* (1958) with its depiction of the U.S.-Mexican border as a place of corruption and violence as a touchstone for all later borderlands movies, Page Laws argues that even in the work of liberal American directors such as Welles and, more recently, the Coen brothers in their 2007 movie *No Country for Old Men*, the act of migration and the hybridization to which it gives rise are surrounded by racial and sexual ambivalence. Even the Mexican-born writers and directors Alejandro González Iñárritu and Guillermo Arriaga in their 2005 movie *Babel* produce problematic self-images that hegemonic U.S. culture has subtly instilled in Mexican consciousness. As Laws points out, the real borders in these films are not geographic: *A Touch of Evil*, *Babel*, and *No Country for Old Men* are philosophical films about the permeable boundaries between, and consequently the mixed nature of, good and evil, humanity and inhumanity, free will and fate, honor and dishonor, godliness and godlessness.

Focusing on the metaphors of border crossing, Cathy Covell Waegner argues that bodies as such become complex borders in the six recent feature films she discusses, including *Bordertown*, *The Last King of Scotland*, and *Lone Star*. Developing film critic James Monaco's notion of the cinematic trope further in the light of postcolonial theory on hybridity and border crossing, Waegner argues that in these movies, both geographical borders