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American Studies as Media and Visual Culture Studies: Observations on a Revitalized Research Tradition

CHRISTOF DECKER

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the development of media and visual culture studies in the larger context of American Studies in Germany. Even though research on media related topics and on visibility has proliferated in the past two decades, I argue there is need for further discussion about its place and practice within American Studies. In the following remarks I touch upon questions of institutional networks, the relation between the concept of culture and media technologies, canon revisions, the pedagogy of media and visual culture topics, and the competing claims of empirical and interpretative approaches. I wish to suggest that further theoretical and methodological debate could strengthen and diversify the growing interest in visual and media studies.

In the last twenty years a significant change has occurred in American Studies institutes throughout Germany. While in the 1970s and 1980s only a few institutes focused on visual culture and media studies, the last two decades have seen the arrival of a younger generation of scholars who have dedicated at least one of their major publications to the topic of media or visual culture. For students interested in American painting, photography, film, television, new media, architecture, advertising, comics, or the graphic arts, numerous institutes offer a great variety of courses and research options: among them traditional strongholds like Berlin, Frankfurt, Munich, or Tübingen but also institutes at Bonn, Dortmund, Erlangen, Göttingen, Hamburg, Mainz, Osnabrück, and Regensburg.¹

This institutional 'visual turn' can be seen as a logical response to the growing need for an area studies discipline to cover all cultural, social, political, and economic phenomena. At one point—the annual conference of the German Association for American Studies in Göttingen in 2006—the discipline even called itself American Studies *as* media studies, while many conferences, publications, and articles in the journal *Amerikastudien / American Studies* have addressed related themes. For example, the Bavarian American Academy has held conferences on 'media cultures' (2003) and 'visual cultures' (2009). Special editions of *Amerikastudien* have appeared on *Early American Visual Culture* (2005), on *Transatlantic Perspectives on American Visual Culture* (2007), and on *Appropriating*

¹ This list is not meant to be comprehensive; a more thorough overview of courses, lecture series, and research activities is available in the annual publication of the German Association for American Studies ("Mitteilungsheft").

Vision(s): Visual Practices in American Women's Writing (2008; see Urricchio and Kinnebrock; Fitz and Gross; Böger and Decker; Spengler). Furthermore, in the last ten years the American Studies Monograph Series published by Winter (Heidelberg) has increasingly included in-depth studies on topics such as visuality and observation, the ethics of media representation in literature, or individual film directors (see Klepper; Kley; Feyerabend).

In their introduction to *American Studies as Media Studies*, Frank Kelleter and Daniel Stein aptly characterize the pivotal importance of media and media technologies as historical and social forces in the United States:

There is probably no other cultural formation whose existence has been linked as intensely to mediation and media revolutions as that of the United States. From the beginning, the unlikelihood of an 'extended republic' (i.e. of a self-ruled polity, cohesive yet dispersed well beyond the bounds that usually permit for territorial or generational solidarity) necessitated the invention of ever new practices and technologies of transcending space and time. These practices and technologies quickly attained global reach. So just as American history is inconceivable without modern media, the history of modern media cannot be told without the United States of America. (ix)

The study of media and visual culture in the context of American Studies is thus a welcome sign of the discipline being diversified and professionalized. And yet, I want to argue that the question of how exactly American Studies *are* media or visual culture studies needs to be addressed more thoroughly, and to posit that a number of theoretical as well as institutional challenges lie ahead. Some of these concerns evolved from a research project on the history of American media and visual culture (see Decker, *Visuelle Kulturen*). This study not only made clear that there exists a strong—if marginal(ized)—research tradition on these topics in the context of American Studies, but also indicated that a large amount of theoretical and historical research conducted in disciplines such as art history, film and television studies, and the history of technology has not been incorporated into American Studies as comprehensively as one might wish. The following observations shall help to identify areas that I believe need more attention and concerted effort at a time when topics of media and visual culture continue to gain importance. My primary focus lies on the history of American Studies in Germany which, even though closely related to the history of American Studies in the United States and other countries in Europe, has a history of its own that may help to explain some of the difficulties that media related topics have encountered in the past.² I will begin with a brief historical overview before turning to institutional challenges, the concept of culture, questions of teaching, and theoretical preoccupations.

In this essay, the terms 'media culture' and 'visual culture' are viewed as complementary concepts. While the designation 'media culture' is often seen to refer to questions of mass culture, technology, and the public sphere, 'visual culture' is sometimes used in a more narrow sense to describe specific forms of visibility.³

² On the history of American Studies in Germany, see Hornung; Sielke; Fluck, "American Studies."

³ Historically, the discourse on mass culture has probably been the most important reference point for a radical critique of media and visual culture from both avant-garde and Marxist critics. In the United States the most influential collection of articles summarizing the debate of

Indeed, media studies developed institutionally from research on radio, film, television, and print while visual culture studies emerged from the redefinition of art history departments. Yet, within the culturalist paradigm of American Studies, both terms have been usefully employed to explore what Larry J. Reynolds has called “cultural iconography.”⁴ For the analysis of concrete examples it may sometimes be helpful to draw on Roland Barthes’ distinction between temporal, protensive, or ‘moving’ forms of audiovisuality and spatial, retentive, or static forms of visuality.⁵ However, many hybrid combinations of image, sound, and text such as comics or graphic novels exist that have increasingly been addressed in recent work and should equally be included in our discussion.⁶

Beginnings and Detours—A Brief Historical Overview

As Alfred Hornung has shown in great detail, the back catalogue of the journal *Amerikastudien* / *American Studies*—published by the German Association for American Studies—may be understood as an indication of changing trends and interests in the practice of American Studies in Germany. It gives evidence of the promising, yet ultimately only partially realized encounter initiated in the 1970s between American Studies on the one hand and the rich history of media and visual culture on the other. In 1976 Miriam Hansen and Martin Christadler published a joint essay on D. W. Griffith’s *Intolerance* (1916)—possibly one of the earliest signs of the new agenda. Furthermore, the famous 1977 special issue on the theory of American Studies devoted a whole section to the question of media and American Studies with contributions from Walter Kühnel, Thomas Elsaesser,

the 1940s and 1950s was edited by Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White. This debate has been continued and updated by authors such as Douglas Kellner. The relationship between a broad concept of media culture and a narrower concept of visual culture has been reversed in recent publications. In the introduction to their very useful book, *Practices of Looking*, Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright suggest in their definition that the “term ‘visual culture’ encompasses many media forms ranging from fine art to popular film and television to advertising to visual data in fields such as the sciences, law, and medicine” (2). However, rather than using ‘visual culture’ as an all-encompassing term, or treating all media as ‘visual,’ I would argue that, from a culturalist perspective, it has been more productive to recognize, and even highlight, their semiotic, technological, aesthetic, or social distinctions.

⁴ In his introductory essay to *National Imaginaries, American Identities* Reynolds states that a “cultural iconography” may be examined by investigating the “use of visual and verbal images to explore American cultural formations” (3).

⁵ See, for instance, sections 35 through 37 in Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*.

⁶ This is one reason why some authors have argued against differentiating among visual media at all. As Mitchell writes, “all media are mixed media, with varying ratios of senses and sign-types” (91). Mitchell’s argument in favor of mixed media is not just related to semiotics, it also attempts to define an institutional space for visual culture studies that is distinct from the more powerful traditions of art history, aesthetics, or media studies: “Visual culture starts out in an area beneath the notice of these disciplines—the realm of non-artistic, non-aesthetic, and unmediated or ‘immediate’ visual images and experiences. It comprises a larger field of what I would call ‘vernacular visuality’ or ‘everyday seeing’ that is bracketed out by the disciplines addressed to visual arts and media” (99).

Winfried Fluck and Christine N. Brinckmann (cf. Hornung 29; Sielke 57). Yet despite these early beginnings, the following years—in particular the 1980s—saw very few substantial publications in these areas—at least in the pages of *Amerikastudien*.⁷

Two explanations come to mind. First, the 1960s and 1970s not only introduced a new and more heterogeneous concept of culture that led to a revision of approaches in American Studies (in the United States as well as in Germany), but also saw the emergence of new academic disciplines dedicated exclusively to film and television studies (see Wise; Freese). As a consequence, the study of media related issues as integral parts of American culture gradually shifted—particularly in the United States—to other academic and institutional fields, a development epitomized by scholars who like Robert Sklar began their work in American Studies and eventually moved to film studies.⁸ The major difference between the American and German academic systems was the latter's much weaker field of film and media studies. In the 1970s and 1980s, however, many German departments—a traditional stronghold of the humanities in Germany—redefined themselves as media studies departments and thus a similar shift eventually did take place.

To give an anecdotal example of the long-term effects of this change: A graduate student once came to see me about a doctoral dissertation she was planning to write. She had just completed her master's thesis on science fiction films and was hoping to continue her investigation of American cinema. We discussed several possible topics and, eventually, I agreed to supervise her project. My initial reservation had been caused by the fact that both she and her work had not come to my attention before: Her master's thesis on American film had been submitted to the department of German studies. What struck me at first as simply curious, on second thought began to worry me. If the departments of German studies had refashioned themselves as media studies by incorporating American films as their source material for master's theses, then something seemed to be going wrong in the field of American Studies. Although this issue was ultimately not a question of seemingly illicit institutional border crossings, or of jealous claims on cultural objects, I felt that American media should be researched and taught within the same discipline that professes to teach and generate privileged knowledge about all other aspects of American life, and that they should enjoy a central rather than a marginal place. In short, one reason for the relative weakness of research on media and visual culture in the 1980s appeared to be the parallel growth of specialized disciplines that were addressing American media culture and, in effect, redirecting scholarly and research activities away from American Studies.

⁷ In his survey of the journal's history, Hornung mentions a total number of 20 articles on media studies as opposed to 433 articles on literature (49).

⁸ Film and the cinema had been studied at American universities from the 1930s onward. The 1960s saw a sharp increase of courses and dissertations primarily within two fields: film production and film aesthetics. While film had been seen as an agent of socialization in the 1930s (e.g., at the University of Chicago), this interest of the social sciences in processes of mass communication had in the 1960s been taken over almost completely by an interest in television. Consequently, film studies were solidly entrenched within the humanities (see Ellis; Bordwell).

A second reason for this weakness was the growing importance of topics such as race, gender, ethnicity, and multiculturalism. Although the 1977 issue of *Amerikastudien* on theories of American Studies had included references to all of these (revisionary) concepts of American culture, it is obvious that, despite such influential and far-sighted publications as Winfried Fluck's *Populäre Kultur*, the fledgling research tradition on popular culture and media studies from the late 1970s had not developed into a major field (cf. Sielke 57). This situation began to change in the 1990s, and the last twenty years have seen a remarkable development with the advent of new publications, research initiatives, and projects such as Popular Seriality at the University of Göttingen, all of which have revitalized interdisciplinary forms of scholarship on American media and visual culture. On the one hand, these topics came in through the back door as, in many cases, the reorientation toward the social history of literature, gender theory, and race studies was accompanied by a gradual expansion into the realm of media and visual culture studies. On the other hand, the generation of scholars who had grown up with American popular culture after World War II and were the driving force behind the discipline's earlier expansion—among them Christine N. Brinckmann, Martin Christadler, Winfried Fluck, Bettina Friedl, Günter Lenz, Berndt Ostendorf, and many others—managed to maintain a high level of commitment to these topics, thus laying the groundwork for younger scholars.⁹

In the journal *Amerikastudien* / *American Studies* the effects of these efforts were noticeable from the early 1990s onward (cf. Hornung 41). There were two special issues on documentary film in 1992 (Warth and Welz) and 1995 (issue 40.2 emerging from the 1994 GAAS conference on “Medienkultur”), a special issue on technology in 1996 (Benesch, *Technology*), and two special issues involving questions of media and historicity as well as media and gender theory in 1998 (Möckel-Rieke and Gunzenhäuser; Reichardt and Sielke). Many media related articles in *Amerikastudien*, too numerous to mention here, and the growing publication of monographs (often in the American Studies Monograph Series) indicate that media and visual culture studies were not only revitalized, but developed into an established and sophisticated activity of research and scholarship under the larger umbrella of American Studies. The study of text and image, cinema, and photography were the strongholds of this revitalized tradition with much research being done on film genres, the history of photography, and the relation between literature and visuality. But there were also publications on television, painting, and new media as well as work on theories of memory, history and visuality, the history of technology, and media theories—the bibliography may provide examples of monographs and other publications indicative of these research activities, yet, it is not meant to provide a comprehensive list which would have to include many more titles. Despite these un-

⁹ Brinckmann published many of her articles on American cinema in *Die anthropomorphe Kamera*; Friedl recently wrote the chapter on American painting for the aforementioned *Visuelle Kulturen*; Ostendorf is currently writing a book on American music. Fluck's commitment to media and visual studies has been exceptionally proficient. He shaped the debate on popular culture in the 1970s and has continued to publish on a wide range of topics including film, painting, and photography (see *Populäre Kultur*, “Crime,” “Aesthetic Experience,” “Poor Like Us,” “Theatralität und Exzess”).

deniably positive developments, however, I believe there are also some weak spots in the current situation—which touch upon questions of theory, teaching, and institutional networks—that need to be addressed and opened up for debate.

Institutional Challenges

The most ambitious and successful project on media culture within the German context of American Studies was initiated in the late 1980s by Alfred Weber and Christine N. Brinckmann at the universities of Tübingen and Frankfurt under the title “Der amerikanische Dokumentarfilm in Forschung und Lehre der deutschen Amerikastudien.” It was financed by the Volkswagen Foundation and set out to examine the history and theory of American documentary films. Together with numerous conferences and research groups it produced a number of important publications (see Beyerle and Brinckmann; Lenz; Hoenisch; Bredella and Lenz; Barchet, Diedrich and Hölbling). As a particularly ambitious part of the project, approximately 130 films were bought as 16-mm copies (later transferred to VHS), forming the basis of an archive to be used in research and teaching. It represented one of the largest collections in Europe and was housed at the Institut für den Wissenschaftlichen Film (IWF) at Göttingen.

For many years films or tapes could be rented from the IWF, but the availability of the Nordamerika-Archiv was terminated when the Institute, for various political and administrative reasons, was closed in 2010. Two colleagues from film studies—Annette Brauerhoch and Heike Klippel—and I tried to intervene and preserve the collection of the Nordamerika-Archiv in its entirety. However, all initiatives to voice the interests of the American Studies and film studies community, and all appeals to be involved in what was happening at the IWF have been futile. As of today, no final steps appear to have been taken. The 16-mm film collection is set to be incorporated into the Bundesarchiv, yet it is not clear what will happen to the VHS tapes, whether there will be an online service to view and show the films via the Technische Informationsbibliothek Hannover (TIB), or how the collection will be accessed in the future.

What this unfortunate, if not disastrous outcome demonstrates is both the (relative) weakness of institutional structures within the American Studies field when it comes to providing the infrastructure necessary for large media related projects, and the urgent need to form strong institutional alliances that help to develop, expand, and maintain the achievements of research on American media and visual culture. In 2003 Astrid Böger, Bettina Friedl, and I launched the Visual Culture Network to propagate closer forms of cooperation within the American Studies community. It has helped to support projects, conferences, and publications and is intended to be developed into a more comprehensive forum of exchange. Yet I believe that more effort should go into the formation of strong institutional ties within the American Studies community and with professional organizations such as archives or museums, in particular—as with the Nordamerika-Archiv—to enable and promote the circulation of material that does not belong to the commercial mainstream.

New Media Encounters

The history of American Studies has been shaped by shifts and breaks within media history and media technologies. As a discipline, however, it has been largely unable to conceptualize and theorize this influence. Although this dynamic is obvious from today's perspective of the digital age which helped to bring about the latest theoretical shifts to globalization and transnationalism (cf. Sielke 89), I want to propose that it has been an instrumental force all along by fundamentally shaping and changing the concept of culture at the heart of the discipline. The underlying dynamic has often been described as a 'new media encounter,' most recently in relation to the emergence of the digital humanities or digital literary studies (see Liu). This encounter follows a recurring pattern: New media technologies establish new ways of recording, storing, retrieving, and receiving information that enlarge the spectrum of cultural objects to be disseminated, appreciated, and studied. They also create new modes of communication, exchange, and social organization as well as new metaphors of discussing culture and new models for analyzing it.

This pattern, which critics have repeatedly discussed,¹⁰ gathered force with the introduction of new technologies such as the gramophone and moving images, so that cultural change in the twentieth century, particularly in the United States, was triggered to a large extent by the 'new media encounter.' Yet, paradoxically, this has not been a central concern for the conceptualization of culture in American Studies—neither in the United States nor in Europe or Germany.¹¹ If we understand the concept of culture to include processes of mediation taking place in the public sphere, it seems to me that this should be addressed more forcefully. The new media encounter with the digital world has not only initiated the process of redefining the humanities, it has once more illustrated the need to theorize the concept of technology as the crucial and contested category relevant to most cultural objects.

Canon Revisions

Many authors have pointed out that the long history and practice of a democratic culture in the United States has influenced the ways in which aesthetic and cultural value is attributed to objects from media and visual culture. Canon revisions of recent years have aimed at being politically representative and have

¹⁰ Recent examples of this discourse are Benesch, *Technology, Romantic*; Emery, Emery, and Roberts; Gunzenhäuser.

¹¹ In the American context of the 1950s—the crucial era of institutionalizing American Studies in the United States—many cultural critics felt that technology had given rise to forms of mass culture that were seen as a threat to their position as intellectuals. As Jonathan Auerbach has argued, many early editions of *American Quarterly* included articles on mass culture, but the journal “took a decidedly literary turn after moving to the University of Pennsylvania in 1951, the same year that the ASA was founded” (43). As he indicates, what followed was a story of missed or abandoned encounters between American Studies and media topics.

propagated a notion of culture based on the premise of inclusion—in effect retracing in the field of art history and visual culture what has long been practiced in literary studies. To cite a recent example from the American context: According to Frances K. Pohl American culture managed to transcend the rift between high and mass culture better than European culture. She argues that there had always been strong interrelations and hybridizations between fine art, folk art, popular art, and mass culture, which is why, in *Framing America*, she expands the canon to include hitherto marginalized groups of artists (cf. Pohl 11; Drucker).

A logical, and welcome, consequence of this line of argument has been the enlargement of the canon of visual and audiovisual material in order to represent more comprehensively the specific blend of elite and popular culture, of mainstream and marginal, and of abstract and figurative forms that developed in the artistic, commercial, and industrial context of American history. Yet in many cases this inclusionary attitude merely masks the methodological difficulties inherent in having to choose objects from media and visual culture that are supposed to be representative and generalizable, or simply productive. How we assign value and meaning to objects in our cultural analyses should become a more markedly theoretical issue. Merely adding new objects to an ever enlarging canon does not adequately address the problem that choice and value, the two categories at the core of the notion of taste, are highly contested strategies of maintaining cultural distinctions in Bourdieu's sense, and that we need to make our criteria for selecting aesthetic objects more explicit.

The question of choice, representativeness, and canon formation is also relevant to another important field that I believe has been woefully neglected: teaching in high school. As Peter Freese has argued, the relationship between American Studies and the teaching of English as a foreign language has had a complicated history. Revisions of the literary canon and the turn to theory in American Studies have apparently not had far-reaching effects in German high schools. On the contrary, according to Freese they seem to have stabilized a traditional modernist literary canon that has proved useful for the purposes of teaching. This analysis is complicated by the fact that, although Freese does not discuss media related topics, popular culture and mass media appear to be regular, if not central elements in high school teaching (cf. Freese 206-20). In fact, as Gerhard Bach and Jürgen Donnerstag write, "popular culture seems to remain an undisputed ideal topic for the EFL-classroom" (317). If this is the case, then questions of representativeness and canon formation—too rarely discussed in American Studies with respect to media and visual culture topics—are also pertinent to the question of how to teach the teachers. What does an 'adequate' selection of films, television series, paintings, or photographs consist of?

The issue of teaching EFL teachers seems to raise even more fundamental questions. Although media and popular culture are obviously very suitable and popular topics, high school teachers are not sufficiently prepared to teach them. In their university training the focus of the final exam questions—at least in Bavaria—lies almost exclusively on literary topics. Thus, teachers who provide the first and arguably most influential introduction to U.S. American culture have at this point no mandatory formal training in the analysis, interpretation, and theory of media and visual culture, even though their pupils grow up with all the bless-

ings of digital and traditional technologies. Teaching film, television, visual culture, and new media may complicate certain institutional procedures and habits, yet this should be taken up as a pedagogical challenge. It may often mean moving into the realm of cultural history, in which technological, institutional, and social histories are as important as the history of aesthetics or interpretation. As many introductions to English and American Studies show, basic analytical skills are often derived from literary models. If we really want to prepare teachers to deal competently with visual and audiovisual examples, and to relate them fruitfully to the North American cultural context, we will have to provide them with far more elaborate and diverse methodological tools.

Theoretical Preoccupations

I want to conclude with some remarks on questions of theory. The interdisciplinary character of American Studies has made it relatively easy to find points of connection with the equally multidisciplinary layout of media and visual culture studies. The concomitant methodological plurality of approaches has ensured a steady production of new and innovative 'readings,' while the lack of hegemonic interpretative paradigms has fuelled a continuous challenge to the received wisdom of an older generation of scholars (see Wise; Fluck, *Theorien*). In the context of American Studies, the analysis of visual and media culture has profited immensely from discussions on national identity, transatlantic relations, race and ethnicity, gender relations, space and the environment, and the critique of older theoretical paradigms from the perspective of the New American Studies. Yet there is a danger that these interpretative frames can also become so dominant that forms of research which do not revolve around concepts of 'Americanness' as the focal point of concern are relegated to the background. Transnational turns notwithstanding, the desire, within American Studies, of being able to claim the 'national significance' of a body of work has at times become overbearing and, from a methodological point of view, unproductive.

One obvious consequence has been that most work on semiotics, narratology, cognitive and emotional impact, and on the reception of visual art forms and audiovisual media has been 'imported' from other disciplines, while little scholarship on these topics originating in the American Studies field is being 'exported.' Questions of theory in American Studies should therefore include more work on foundational aspects of media, how they work and create meaning, and how they tell stories and affect audiences. A second consequence has been a dominance of hermeneutic approaches, or 'readings,' over more empirically oriented forms of research. In contrast to fields like film studies or the history of technology, little primary research has been done on institutional, technological, or industrial relations. To be sure, many of these insights have been incorporated into the research of the American Studies community, but in order to strengthen its particular research tradition I believe there should be more projects that successfully manage to integrate the interpretative richness of cultural studies with primary archival research on industrial and institutional relations.

To conclude, I began this article with a brief sketch of the remarkable progress that research on media and visual culture has made in the (German) context of American Studies. Against this positive background, my suggestions are therefore intended to identify some areas of our academic practices that I believe could profit from a more elaborate discussion. I have suggested the need to establish strong institutional networks within the American Studies community and the necessity to theorize media technologies as a central aspect of the concept of culture. I have put forward my belief that we should add media and visual culture topics to the teacher training curriculum with respect to questions of canon formation, but even more importantly, concerning basic methodological and analytical skills. Finally, I have suggested that conducting more work on foundational aspects of media and visuality and undertaking more primary archival research are necessary steps for the further professionalization of scholarship on media and visual culture in the European context of American Studies. Most of these issues are certainly not unique to American Studies, but they have developed their own history in this field that could make them fruitful points for further debate and discussion.

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