

Media convergence and the teaching of film studies

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Abstract

In today's increasingly fractured media landscape, technology is changing rapidly, and the way we watch and teach films is undergoing transformations that can be understood as both positive and negative. This article seeks to examine how the era of media convergence has affected the teaching of film studies at tertiary level. I propose this has occurred in two key ways. The first is the digitalisation of media content. This process has had a profound effect on the specific practice of teaching and how tertiary students engage with the media and screen texts they study. The second, perhaps more meaningful, way is a redefining of the disciplinary boundaries of film and media studies. I argue this has had significant implications for film studies in particular, in terms of how it is valued as a singular discipline and how its integration into tertiary programs is increasingly marginalised in favour of more vocationally-focussed media programs.

Keywords

Media Convergence; Film Studies; Teaching; Pedagogy

This issue of *fusion journal* has explored “what it means to study cinema and/or other forms of screen-media in today's increasingly fractured media landscape.” This is a landscape in which, increasingly, not only is technology changing rapidly, but also how we watch and teach films has undergone transformations that can be understood as both positive and negative. This article seeks to examine how the era of media convergence has affected the teaching of film studies at tertiary level. I propose this has occurred in two key ways. The first is the digitalisation of media content. This process has had a profound effect on the specific practice of teaching and how tertiary students engage with the media and screen texts they study. The second, perhaps more meaningful, way is a redefining of the disciplinary boundaries of film and media studies. I argue this has had significant implications for film studies in particular, in terms of how it is valued as a singular discipline.

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There are several evident ways the digitalisation of media content has had, and continues to have, a positive effect on the teaching of film and media. Increasingly, these two disciplines have been categorised under the wider umbrella term of screen studies. For the sake of streamlining this discussion, however, I will focus specifically on film studies. If we compare the differences between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in terms of film technology, the overwhelming distinction is the increasing availability of film in the home and in the cinema. In the early years of film studies as an academic discipline, films were only available via theatrical release at the cinema, a small selection of VHS tapes and film reels, or the sometimes unpredictable opportunity to watch and record a film playing on television. The past 25 years have seen a vast improvement and expansion in the availability of film with the introduction of DVDs, Blu-Rays, subscription streaming services, as well as crowd-sourced technologies such as YouTube and torrents. This significant improvement in the availability of film has made possible the study of previously less accessible categories of films, such as foreign, cult, and silent film, allowing for a substantially richer film education program. It is not just the ability to obtain films that has had such huge benefits for teaching in a media converged world, but also the ability to share, pause, rewind and scrutinise films closely for the purpose of analysis. To offer an example of personal experience from my own classroom, my students are often given broad, analytical questions related to their topic of study for the week. Using their laptops and either free services such as YouTube or film databases from the university library, such as Kanopy, they are tasked with answering that question by finding very specific examples and techniques in the film. Such access to digitised media content allows for close analysis by both film studies students and teachers. It also teaches students not only the broader philosophical and thematic significance of a film, but also the more technical and analytical skills of locating camera, sound and performance techniques in the film.

While the digitalisation of media content has had measurable benefits for teaching film, it also has several drawbacks. The students' access to content on their devices certainly aids learning. But the key issue here is that film students access all media—cinema, television, YouTube videos, podcasts, video essays—on the same devices via the same means; this means that not only are the platforms converged, but the experience of engaging with them are, too. In other words, it is increasingly difficult to differentiate between different forms of visual screen media in the classroom. Students are coming to university with more visual literacy than ever before—since they are immersed in an increasingly hyper-aestheticised popular culture—but, paradoxically, they do not always have the tools to deconstruct and analyse distinct forms of visual media. Students are now not as familiar as they once were with the unique experience of viewing a film in a cinema, or as Dana Polan puts it, with the “position of power over the spectator” exerted by the imposing theatrical cinema screen. While this outcome is the inevitable result of digitised media content, and certainly a sign that film studies needs to develop to keep up with changing consumption practices, it creates numerous issues for teaching film. Students' lack of familiarity with a broad range of viewing experiences means that, for the film studies teacher, differentiating between the various techniques, histories and values of individual forms of screen media is challenging. For a significant part of screen history, the practices of viewing and exhibiting film and

television have been very separate, with their own distinct set of traditions and cultural values. By conflating these media forms, these histories are at worst lost and at best challenging for students to engage with.

Greater than the effect of digitalisation is the gradual redefining of disciplinary boundaries that has had a profound impact on teaching film in an era of media convergence. Much has been written on whether film studies can and will remain a distinct discipline or whether it has or will become subsumed into the broader field of media studies (See Polan, Kouvaros). As often acknowledged (Polan, Kouvaros) film studies is not and has never been a distinct discipline. Throughout its approximate fifty-year history, it has always borrowed methodologies, theories and approaches from other disciplines, such as philosophy, history, art history and sociology. Through the 1980s and 1990s, film studies was also considerably affected by “the rise of interdisciplinarity” (Cartwright 8) which subsumed film studies into cultural studies and introduced to film the parallel research methodologies of gender, queer and non-western studies, to name a few. Similarly, other humanities and social science disciplines—history, philosophy, languages, and literary studies, for example—use film as either a secondary or primary source within their own research methodologies, and yet, these disciplines remain distinct from film studies. In other words, to use film as a research object is not necessarily to undertake film studies. As such, film studies has been constantly evolving since its beginnings in response to its relationship to these other disciplines and has become much more allied with other humanities subjects than its media studies origins suggest.

Notably, film studies has also responded to broader technological and industrial changes, particularly in dominant western film industries. In the mid-1990s, scholars and filmmakers alike began announcing the apparent “death of film” as digital technologies used for filmmaking began overtaking analogue ones, changing not only the aesthetic but also the form of films and film distribution. As Andre Gaudreault points out, this “death” is only the most recent one to be bestowed upon film: the introduction of both sound in the 1920s and television in the 1950s sparked similar crises (287). Of all the various forms of convergence and major shifts, technological convergence as part of the digital revolution has had the most profound effect on both film as a medium, and film studies as a discipline. Undoubtedly, convergence has occurred at the level of the platform; cinema, television, photography and even print media are all viewed and consumed on the same device. Their digitalisation makes them more alike than different.

Film studies has had to respond to these changes in the pedagogical approaches outlined at the beginning of this article and also in including a broader range of media texts as part of a film studies education. Students of film studies are increasingly introduced to visual media outside the traditional definition of theatrically-released cinema, which is expanded to include television (both broadcast and streaming), web series and video art. While film was once defined by its commitment to the indexical, photographic image, the digital revolution has necessitated the redefining of film (Uricchio 267). In response to this changing environment in the past ten to fifteen years, many universities have converted their film studies programs to titles that

encompass a broader range of screen texts, such as “visual cultures,” “film and television,” “screen studies,” and “moving images” (Gaudreault 280, 288-289). These broader program titles offer a safeguard against the inevitable and constant shift in technologies, which will continue to destabilise the definition of film. The “death of film,” proclaimed over twenty years ago, has had a progressive and undeniable effect on film studies.

It is problematic, however, to equate convergence, as part of the digital revolution, with the death of film studies, or, to equate the apparent death of film with the death of film studies. The core issue in defining the boundaries of film and media is not the form of the text being studied. The development of film studies over the past few decades has proven that the discipline is capable of adopting new texts as objects of studies while still remaining steadfastly the same discipline at its core. Rather, the threat to film studies’ stability is both pedagogical and institutional. Although media studies and film studies increasingly share many of the same objects of study, they differ substantially in their disciplinary methodologies. Both disciplines are demonstrably valid approaches to the study and teaching of media objects, but neither one can replace the other. Yet, the overwhelming trend across tertiary institutions in Australia and elsewhere is to subordinate film studies to media or screen studies; to emphasise the dominance of the latter, which threatens to diminish the significance of the former.

These program changes at universities risk removing film studies from its origins as a humanities discipline—a non-vocational discipline, designed to encourage critical thinking and a questioning of the world around us via cinema—towards becoming a potentially neglected sub-discipline of the more vocationally focussed media studies. Media studies is not, by definition, a vocational discipline. Its implementation in several Bachelor of Arts degrees across Australia, however, is geared towards producing graduates for specific professions and industries. In several of these degree programs film studies exists not as a discrete discipline, but as part of a broader media studies or screen studies major. The University of Technology Sydney, The University of Newcastle and Macquarie University, for example, all maintain a vocationally-focussed media studies major, which includes a small number of film studies courses. This vocational focus is further strengthened by the exploding enrolment numbers of dedicated Bachelor of Communications and Bachelor of Media degrees at UNSW, RMIT and Monash University. These program structures have potential benefits for the media studies student. They are offered the dual benefit of a program that prepares them specifically for a career in the media—journalism, public relations, or screen production—and the skills of critical thinking and textual analysis normally offered by film studies. Numerous universities in Australia maintain a humanities-focused film or screen studies major, including Monash, University of South Australia, UNSW, University of Queensland, University of Sydney and University of Melbourne, but these are increasingly threatened by decreasing enrolment numbers.

Understandably, universities and individual departments are under pressure to demonstrate value to students through the courses they provide. One of the ways this value can be demonstrated for film studies is by increasing the number of practical, vocationally-oriented skills taught in a program. As such, film studies program

designers are pressured into including filmmaking skills or internships with studios and film festivals in their curricula. Undeniably these kinds of skills are advantageous for the students; they provide them with practical skills and industry networking opportunities invaluable to their future careers. But their inclusion in countless film studies programs confirms a common assumption of the discipline: that its only worth is its ability to practically prepare a student to work in the film industry. It undermines film studies' vital role as principally a humanities subject, which can offer equally valuable but less tangible skills to a graduate. Given the significant crossover between film and media students in many university programs, the issue of keeping media and film studies separate is not just a matter of producing two different kinds of graduates; it is more likely a matter of producing one type of graduate with a broad range of analytical as well as practical skills. In 2017, Therese Davis expressed a similar concern that "a media student would leave university without exposure to the humanistic tradition of increasing their self-understanding and furthering their critical enquiry into culture and society through analysis of a human art such as cinema" (Davis). While technological convergence gives media studies and film studies the appearance of being the same, they serve very different ends. Film studies examines a human art. It teaches a specific way of reading, and its methodologies are unique to the discipline and bare little relation to media studies. We live in a world where visual literacy and critical thinking are increasingly important, and by losing the disciplinary specificity of film studies, we also miss the opportunity to instil in our students these vital intangible skills.

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About the author

Melanie is a film scholar and tutor at School of the Arts & Media at UNSW, and she teaches screen studies at AFTRS. She is co-founder and president of Sydney Screen Studies Network. Her thesis investigated the aesthetic, political and ethical role of the long take in contemporary European cinema. She has broad research interests in the history of film style in Europe and Asia.