In April of 2009, the graduate students of USC’s Division of Critical Studies and the interdivisional PhD program in Media Arts and Practice (iMAP) co-hosted a graduate student conference organized around the theme of translation. Of course, translation has been theorized by scholars from the humanities and social sciences, as well as by many cultural producers from within the academy and beyond, as a signifier and mediator of cultural difference as articulated through language, the image, the body, political-economic formations, and the many intersections among these forms. However, the term has reemerged with a new sense of urgency and relevance in the last decade as we stand in the wake of a number of global shifts, both destructive and productive, brought on by neoliberalism, de-regulation, media conglomeration, new modes of militarism, and the proliferation of digital technologies. The conference organizers chose translation as a theme because we believe it has the potential to serve as a critical lens for the interlaced and often contradictory transformative processes at work amidst these paradigmatic shifts, as media objects, policies, and economies increasingly traffic across geographic borders, cultural institutions and technological platforms.

Structural changes in local, regional and transnational media cultures rendered by these traversals challenge us to find new transdisciplinary methodologies and creative approaches that might help make sense of them. For instance, media studies has sought to exchange and translate theoretical vocabularies with critical race theory, ethnic studies, queer theory, visual studies, and performance studies, to name only a few fields. Moreover, many media scholars are now searching for meaningful ways to materialize their research beyond textual forms and are looking to software programming, video production, physical computing and collaborative relationships with practitioners to do so. Simultaneously, media artists are increasingly thematizing translation in their work, while also seeking out new translative possibilities offered by imaginative uses of sound and video, alternative exhibition spaces, or in the movement away from the two-dimensional image toward sculptural objects and architectural installations.

We wanted the range of our conference presenters to demonstrate this diversity of interpretations and political stakes engendered by a concept like translation. And we could only be excited by the lively array of creative and scholarly voices heard from students and artists, who not only made the trip to Los Angeles from Canada and across the United States in order to participate in this conversation, but offered up their work for publication in this issue of Spectator. We also feel grateful to have been an audience for the innovative work presented by our three keynote speakers—the Los Angeles-based artists, Julia Meltzer and David Thorne, and media studies scholar-practitioner, Lisa Parks—whom we
believe all represent inspiring models for thinking about translation and media culture, particularly in a transnational context. What follows here is a brief summary of the array of works first presented at the “Translating Media” conference, which are now included in this issue, as well as a few meditations on what we see as the broader issues at play among them. While we are unable to include copies of the keynote addresses here, we have done our best to provide in this introduction proper synopses of our guest speakers’ thoughtful and compelling presentations. However, as comes with the limits and possibilities afforded by practices of translation, this introduction’s compressed accounts of the works presented in this issue cannot particularize the pleasures and joy generated by the collaborations and friendships formed around the organization of this conference, this theme, and journal issue.

One topic broached by several of the works included in this issue of Spectator is the tenuous relationship between language and media. By this, we do not mean the grammar of cinema nor are we referencing Lev Manovich’s influential book. The critical works described here reflect upon the various ways in which language is currently being figured by media. Indeed, this would not appear to be a very surprising line of inquiry given the textual dimension immediately associated with practices of translation. However, the conceptualizations of language and media proffered by keynote speakers Julia Meltzer and David Thorne, and conference presenters Courtney White, Michelle Cho, and Christine Mitchell, could hardly be called predictable. Rather, they consider language’s often unexpected intersections with less explicitly “textual” forms, like the global media industry and local religious institutions, while also providing fresh perspectives on topics most often associated with media translation, such as subtitling and software coding. In many ways, this issue’s essays are in keeping with the spirit of N. Katherine Hayles’ argument that tying textuality too intimately to the convention of print narrows considerably our analytic horizons; instead, if we think of language and text as “correspondences rather than ontologies,” as “entrained processes” rather than objects or outcomes, we might conceive of them as more than just the written transcriptions of ideas or concepts. We might reposition translation as always already constitutive of language, involving much more than just the movement of static meanings across isolated media platforms and/or media cultures.

In a description of Julia Meltzer and David Thorne’s work, Fionn Meade has invoked Michel DeCerteau, writing that their “delinquent” stories “live not on the margins but in the interstices of the codes that it undoes and displaces.” Meltzer and Thorne’s keynote conference presentation featured screenings of several completed film projects and a work-in-progress, interspersed with a discussion of the duo’s creative theoretical process. The talk offered a studied contemplation on language as the irreducible, always fragmented process of cultural and often religious formation.

The pair’s most recent body of work focuses on various aspects of contemporary Syrian political and cultural life, incorporating footage developed and shot while in Damascus. This world, then another, one of their current works-in-progress that emerged as the centerpiece of their presentation, is a documentary that focuses on a specific geopolitical issue: the centrality of literacy to the formation of female religious identity at the Al-Zahra Mosque Summer Qur’an School for Girls and Women. Framed by the everyday realities of global politics, the film explores the intersections of faith, piety, pedagogy, community, and gender politics, and does so without retreating to spaces of liberal humanist and/or second wave feminist discourse. On the contrary, their work implicitly questions what Inderpal Grewal has described as a U.S.-based interventionist logic that mobilizes the Muslim woman and girl as a justification for occupation or imperialist education. What does religious training in the holy text of the Qur’an mean to these young women that does not get articulated by the North American media? This world, then another ultimately speaks about the critical importance, especially at this political moment, of addressing the many ways that language, faith and subjecthood intersect, and not just within the confines of a Christianity-based rhetoric.

Courtney White and Michelle Cho raise important questions about transnational iterations of language, genre, and global cinemas
in their contributions to this issue. White’s essay, “Transliterated Vampires: Subtitling and Globalization in Timur Bekmambetov’s Night Watch Trilogy,” discusses the industrial and aesthetic motivations for the use of animated or “abusive” subtitling in the U.S. releases of Nochnoi Dozor (English title: Night Watch, 2004/U.S. release 2006) and Dnevnoy Dozor (English title: Day Watch, 2006/U.S. release 2007), the first two installments of a supernatural film trilogy originally produced and distributed in Russia. White notes that subtitling has historically been regarded as either a grotesque distraction of the viewer’s eye, hence the standardized practice of rendering them as inconspicuous as possible, and/or an inherently failed enterprise of capturing all of the textured layers of a film’s “native language.” In their U.S. distributions, however, Night Watch and Day Watch foreground their subtitles by animating them with familiar American graphic conventions, in order to make the meanings of these Russian language films more accessible and saleable to U.S. audiences.

Cho’s essay, “The Good, the Bad, and the Generic: Translation and Transference in East Asian Westerns,” looks closely at two cinematic texts—The Good, the Bad and the Weird (Kim Ji-woon, South Korea, 2008) and Sukiyaki Western Django (Takashi Miike, Japan, 2007). In her analysis, Cho proposes a broader methodological re-evaluation for considering these films as Westerns: she suggests that Jean Laplanche’s concept of translation might help dislodge the study of such transnational genre films away from analytical models that seek merely to distinguish the traces between a film’s “authentic” versus “imported” cultural and generic conventions. To adopt such an approach, Cho argues, is to take up an “anti-hermeneutics” that acknowledges genre as always already a translation, rather than as a locatable set of audiovisual signs.

Moving away from the cinematic, Christine Mitchell’s essay, “Translation and Materiality: The Paradox of Visible Translation,” provides a number of crucially important insights into the intersection between theories of translation, software, and code; Mitchell pushes on the ways in which these junctions can inform our understanding of language’s materiality. Warning against the compulsion to define “translation” narrowly as a “disambiguated informational flow,” Mitchell urges those engaged with software studies to consider critically the relations between interface and a computer’s inner workings, without sacrificing language’s multiplicity.

A second thematic node organizing this issue’s collection of essays are those questions pertaining to what Henry Jenkins has called “convergence culture,” and what Mark Andrejevic has described as the conditions for a culture of surveillance. As corporations, fans, cultural producers, and governmental bodies exchange ideas, information, and capital across a greater number of increasingly interconnected media platforms, debates have ignited over whether this yields more creative choice and autonomy for consumers, or simply leads to further avenues for corporate management of consumers’ tastes and privacy. Suzanne Scott and Elena Bonomo offer nuanced appraisals about the tensions that arise in these contentions about participatory culture.

In “The Trouble With Transmediation: Fandom’s Negotiation of Transmedia Storytelling Systems,” Scott confronts the paradoxical logic that riddles commercial transmedia narratives’ supposed promise of de-centralized collaborations among media producers and fans. Practical realities suggest that these top-down-authorized collaborations do not actually translate into creative diversity; in fact, they circumscribe fan participation, often by relocating the authority of the text’s meanings back into a masculine author’s voice. This is glaringly obvious after reading Scott’s case study of Ronald
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In her essay, “The Rumors Are True! Gossip Girl and the Cooptation of the Cult Fan,” Bonomo critically examines the promotion of cross-platform consumption within both the diegesis and publicity materials for the TV series Gossip Girl. She sharply critiques how the show’s textual and extra-textual world coaxes viewers into articulating their fandom via mobile and Internet media technologies, naturalizing the relationship between commercial desires and the expression of fan identity.

Joshua Neves’s work differs from Scott and Bonomo’s essays in its interests, but shares an investment in thinking about how digital technologies are expanding media platforms and are now including media architectures. His essay, “Civic Beautification Panels in Olympic-era Beijing,” considers these changes with respect to outdoor screen culture, particularly in postsocialist Beijing. His fascinating study and photographic project explore how beautification panels, billboards, and scaffolding wraps have been used to camouflage potentially unattractive sites of metropolitan construction and urban renewal throughout this city-in-transition. These massive screens, which serve a distinctly civic rather than a commercial function, visually translate between the architectural realities of a formerly socialist Beijing and spatial fantasies and anxieties of the city after China’s full entry into the modern global arena.

Katherine Newbold and Jaimie Baron’s essays offer innovative analyses about how the concept of translation might help us re-constitute our theories about the archive. Newbold’s critical intervention brings the discussion of fan production and transmedia platforms into conversation with archival theories. Her essay, “Doctor Who: The Transmedia Archive,” looks at the long-running BBC television series, for which a large number of black-and-white episodes from the 1960s remain missing. When some of the show’s recovered pieces were posted online by the British network, fans began to digitally produce and upload reconstructions, or “recons,” of the missing episodes, which have been subsequently adapted and re-interpreted by other fans. This online collection of collaboratively-made media texts, Newbold observes, has yielded its own kind of archive that hinges not on an originary artifact, but on a set of translations and re-translations of an absent object; as Newbold puts it, it is an archive that is simultaneously constituted as it is effaced.

Baron’s essay, “Translating the Document Across Time and Space; William E. Jones’ Tearoom,” is inspired largely by a set of debates that erupted at the 2008 Los Angeles Filmforum festival around the artistic and ethical merit of Jones’ work. The film is comprised of surveillance footage that was recorded in a public restroom in Ohio in 1962, which was then used by police to arrest and prosecute men under the state’s anti-sodomy law. Baron bemoans how the simplistic evaluative schemas mounted by various members of the Filmforum audience gloss over the work’s more complex provocations about practices of recontextualization. Like Newbold, Baron upends traditional conceptions of the archival as defined by the static and contained object, instead re-defining the archival film as the multiple epistemological and experiential registers one encounters within a single text. Revising Roland Barthes’ notion of the “reality effect,” Baron coins the phrase “archive effect” to describe the processes by which a viewer recognizes the spatio-temporal differences between the film being screened and the moment of its recording.

In addition to Meltzer and Thorne’s keynote address, we were pleased to include conference presentations from remarkable media artists. Thought-provoking projects presented by Tim Schwartz and the collaborators Adrià Julià and Débora Antscherl serve as crucial reminders of the complex theoretical mediations proffered by media arts. Schwartz, a San Diego-based artist who primarily builds three-dimensional sculptural pieces, also engages largely with archival themes. His presentation, “Physical Information,” featured a photographic slideshow of a number of mechanical devices he has constructed over the last several years. One of his most exciting pieces, “Command Center,” consists of a wall-mounted wooden board that displays a constellation of gauges that signify how frequently certain words—“war,” “insurgents,” “weapons”—appeared in the New York Times between the years of 1851 and 2008. Placed alongside these gauges, an LED
display moves forward and backward through history, displaying years that first rise in number then descend, as the gauges’ needles swing left or right according to the popularity of each word for the corresponding year. All of the works Schwartz presented in “Physical Information” mechanically perform translation of historical discourse in three-dimensional encapsulations of time, and his sculptures ultimately stand as veritable archives, which attest, with a degree of comedic critical distance, to the accumulative patterns and traceability of language in print media. We have included images of Schwartz’s work in this issue, and this, in turn, enacts its own kind of translation—transposing sculpture into photograph—pointing us to the specificity of our interactions with any creative work, be it written, image/sound-based, or sculptural.

The collaborative work of Adrià Julià and Débora Antscherl foreground these very phenomenological specificities by thematizing the experiential process of translation in their art. In their presentation, “Attempted Translations,” Julià, a conceptual artist of twelve years, and Antscherl, who has worked for fifteen years as a translator for a number of magazines and Hollywood studios, explored the relationship between the visual and auditory registers of language. Incorporating a spectrum of media ranging from live interpretations of printed scripts to a filmed Basque dance performance, they worked to make translation itself a sensorial and embodied set of interactions between themselves and their audience rather than a process restricted to a single text.

Lisa Parks, Associate Professor of Film and Media Studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara, author of the groundbreaking book *Cultures in Orbit: Satellites and the Televisual* and co-editor of the seminal anthology *Planet TV: A Global Television Reader*, gave the concluding presentation of the conference. Her talk, “Signals and Oil: Satellite Footprints and Post-Communist Territories in Central Asia,” provided an exciting foray into the stakes and investments currently held within media studies. She convincingly calls for a new methodological model for analyzing a media object too often elided by the field: the satellite footprint. The footprint literally refers to the geographical area reached by a satellite’s transmission, but it also shines a crucial critical spotlight onto the historical and cultural conditions of a region. Parks’ keynote address closely followed the struggles over the re-territorialization of satellite footprints specifically in Central Asia, are transforming, or transnationalizing, infrastructures of finance and trade, communication, and political alliances in the region.

As many formerly socialist nations enter the neoliberal marketplace, the question of satellite communication has been a top priority, not only because these technologies transmit television and phone signals, but because satellite giants like Eutestat simultaneously facilitate the aerial monitoring of highly lucrative oil fields as well as communication with these remote sites. Thus, every year since 2003, the Caspian Telecom Conference has been held in Turkey, a nation upheld by entrepreneurs as an exemplar nation that has successfully liberalized its telecommunications system. It is here that representatives from various nations and transnational corporations discuss their desires and plans for the carving of footprints in the rapidly privatizing Caspian region.

To analytically tackle this incredibly complex set of negotiations, Parks proposes the interdisciplinary model of “footprint analysis,” which draws from cultural and media studies, cultural geography, critical geopolitics, and feminist critiques of science and technology, to make sense of the material and discursive processes organized around this geographic node. Footprint analysis thus brings under its lens the many translatable
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exchanges that are taking place as the uses of broadcast technologies are being expanded into other capital-generating forms and as national representatives gather to articulate the agendas and needs of their countries. Moreover, Parks’ innovative work reminds us that it is impossible to make sense of these rapidly transforming communications infrastructures without translating between multiple theoretical, historical and political discourses.

The organizers chose “Translating Media” as the title of this conference in order to foreground translation as a contemporary and ongoing process. However, we also believe the title speaks to the crucial importance we feel, especially as graduate students and as potential intellectual and creative vanguards, in understanding our own methodological, institutional, and ethical positionality at this critical junction, however small or wide our current and future readerships and viewersheds. It always behooves us to pause and ask, “How exactly are we translating media right now as users, consumers, cultural producers, and researchers?” The essays in this issue, while loosely organized by the themes of language, convergence, archive, and artistic practice, are all undeniably in conversation with one another and share an interest in grappling with a set of underlying questions: how do we even begin to talk about the dramatic cultural and global shifts that are facilitated by and productive of constantly changing media forms, and how are the ways in which we engage with these shifts going to affect how we make media or how it makes us?

The essays that follow in this issue intimate a certain “presentness” in their investments, a desire to make sense of this particular moment academically and creatively. For this reason, they are not meant to be fully formed or fleshed out treatises about their cultural objects. Rather, they are meant to provide entry-points, portals, or, to borrow the inspiring words of our dear professor, colleague, and friend, the late Anne Friedberg, “windows” onto possibilities for “newly mediated epistemes,” different ways of knowing, seeing, and experiencing our material and virtual worlds. As Lisa Parks reminded us in her closing remarks, we should never forget the obvious, though often taken-for-granted, reality that graduate students are the future of the academy. With no delusions of grandeur, we hope the works presented in this issue offer a few kernels of these kinds of self-reflexive considerations, as well as signposts for the kinds of imaginative modes of thinking and cultural production that promise the persistence of the humanities and media arts in the years to come.

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Notes

3 Fionn Meade, “Oh, Inverted World,” Fillip 8 (Fall 2008), 5.
11 Parks’ talk has since been published under the title, “Signals and Oil: Satellite Footprints and Post-Communist Territories in Central Asia,” European Journal of Cultural Studies 12.2 (2009), 137–156.