

INTRODUCTION

Steve Jankowski and Mary Grace Lao

Turns and Returns



The concept of the “turn” has been used to describe shifting intellectual perspectives since the late 20th century, paving the way for “unexamined cross-disciplinary fields of inquiry” (Bachmann-Medick 2016: 1). As anyone in academia or in the creative arts will have observed, there is no lack of qualifiers for these curious movements: the affective, critical, cultural, digital, discursive, linguistic, material, political, post-human, post-modern, spatial, and visual to name but a few. It is precisely because of their constant presence in graduate life that the 15th annual Intersections | Cross-Sections (ISCS) conference committee chose “Re: Turns” as its organizing concept.

ISCS is a graduate student conference and art exhibit hosted by York and Ryerson Universities’ joint program in Communication and Culture. In March 2016 this interdisciplinary conference invited graduate students, emerging scholars, and artists to investigate the turn as a catalyst for change in their respective fields. What turns do they identify in their own research and practice? How does a turn aid in the theorization of contemporary issues? This special issue is the product of the presenters’ academic and artistic expertise in teasing out these questions.

Opening this special issue is Will Straw’s keynote, *Twists and Turns: Splits, Snowballs and Tweaks in Cultural Theory*. Building off of Bachmann-Medick’s assertion that turns act as “conformative pressures” within academia (Bachmann-Medick 2016: 8), Straw introduces the topic as being rife with contradiction and interweaving intellectual moments. While he covers the traditional lineage of linguistic, material, and spatial turns, he is quick to point out that these turns have never been adopted in a straightforward manner. They are complicated by the competing pressures of fashionability, belonging, and coercion. Straw goes on to tell us, that turns,

as monumental changes in direction, do not satisfy the nature of what it means to maneuver collectively in thought. He describes the nuances of moves, of tweaks, and of snowballs that expand our sense of these motions. Which leads us to question how turns have emerged, re-emerged, or have ceased to be relevant.

As showcased in this special issue, we noticed that, despite the call to engage with as many turns as possible, the submissions tended to revolve around only a few distinct turns. The contemporary issues of communication and cultural studies more often than not were theorized in terms of the following turns: material, affect, culture, spatial, and digital. It is perhaps not surprising that the influence of materiality was most heavily felt in the area of artistic research.

Beginning with Natalie Hunter's *Rosy Pictures*, we come into contact with the tensions between remembering and re-presenting. Her seven photographs of found and digitally manipulated Kodachrome slides assert the materiality of memory. By complicating the pervasiveness of digital culture, Hunter displays a compelling account of the immanence of archival images as they exist now and as records of history.

Materiality and memory also figure heavily in Kyler Zeleny's *Found Polaroids*. Starting with a collection of polaroids once belonging to complete strangers, Zeleny invited participants to create short "flash-fiction" narratives transforming these lost stories into new memories. The question of who owns a memory looms large in this work. These ephemeral stories are passed and transformed by each stranger who attends to these impersonal yet personal photographs. As Zeleny's participatory work suggests, there is much to be gained by the uncertainty of collaboration. This could not be better understood than from one of the conference's most appropriate workshops.

Inspired by Panya Clark Espinal's work, *Lost in the Wood*, Lauren Cullen's workshop used the materials and practices of rug hooking to reconfigure the cognitive and physical space of the conference through participatory art. *Lost in the Rug* challenged the temporal and authoritative stance implied by contemporary academic conferences by involving attendees in rug hooking. Those new to rug hooking quickly became teachers; theory, life, and creation intermingled as discourse and as an emergent practice. This work manifested any conference's etymological intent: to "bring together in conversation".

Kait Kribs's *Artist-as-Intermediary* provides a helpful theoretical bridge between the artistic and academic ISCS contributions. She argues that the digital turn in media production has introduced new economic qualifiers for the old labels of authentic musicians and mainstream sellouts. Digital technologies have often been slated as allowing greater creative control by eliminating intermediaries. However, Kribs illustrates how this process effectively folds artists into intensified forms of exploitation. Using the paradigmatic case study of the musician Car Seat Headrest,

Kribs explains how neoliberalized promotion becomes a creative and poorly paid labour that is downloaded onto unsigned musicians.

Emilie Hurst's article *Going North* similarly takes musicians and authenticity as a focal point. However, she does so by analyzing the cultural grand narratives of Canadian identity articulated by Glenn Gould and the indie rock band Stars. In this critical analysis the author contends that authenticity is constructed out of a distance between mainstream music as much as the lyrical lean on constructing the North-as-frontier. Both a place of dangerous mystery and familiar return, Hurst alludes to the ways that southern Canadians continue to symbolically colonize the North.

Definitions of authenticity continue, not just within authenticity as an artist, but also in lived experiences. Building upon Doreen Massey's notion of "throwntogetherness," a concept which understands place as an event rather than a geographical location, Tricia Toso turns towards experiences of sound in order to define the sensibility of place. In *The Soundscape of Becoming Place: Rhythms and Voices of Village des Tanneries*, we are presented with the experiences of two individuals as they recall their daily experiences in the same urban geographical location. It is evident that despite being in the same space, both participants hear and recall different elements of sound that define how they live and move.

Connecting to the discussion on urban spaces, Thomas Szwedska investigates the use of Chinese nail houses as an act of resistance to China's modernization efforts. For families who choose to remain in a nail house, dwellings that purposely obstruct the continuation of construction, tradition is reimagined as a political statement. As exemplified by these buildings, the tensions between modernization and traditional ways of living stress the dynamics of urban spaces. Through the synthesis of published interviews with nail house owners, Szwedska provides a critical distinction between homogenization and globalization within China. The inhabitants of nail houses are forced into an uncertain relation of belonging: in both Mr. Han and Mrs. Zhang's cases, their once private space is now public and in particular, a public that does not accept them.

In *What fighting back feels like*, Maija Duncan makes an argument of the importance of powerful symbols and imagery in/on social change. The use of political art in Québec and in particular, the use of the red square during the 2012 Québec student strike evoked strong emotions for activists and students directly and indirectly involved in the protests. Being four years removed from the event, Duncan reflects on the sustaining power of affect in the politics of unrest. The intensity of these feelings make it difficult, if not impossible, to separate the symbol from the experience, from the body.

In Hiba Alhomoud's theory-driven article, she asks the important question: *What does affect theory do?* In order to find an answer, she reviews theories of attention

and affect by William James and Wayne Wu, and Eve Sedgwick and Melissa Gregg, respectively. Leaning on the non-dualistic nature of affect and notions of selective attention described by these authors, Alhomoud builds a theoretical argument for why affect can be understood as the reconstitution of “beyond-ness” as “beside-ness”. She connects these concepts to an ethical notion of attending. What affect theory does in this respect is outline our responsibility for the things that we attend to and acknowledge how our choices to include some forms of knowledge will likewise exclude others.

Finally, this issue of *eTopia* concludes with Samantha Brown’s self-reflexive article, *A Turn Towards Academobilities*. This piece asks scholars: What political consequences occur when academics move bodies, knowledge, and information? By borrowing perspectives from mobility studies and applying them to academic movements, she creates the portmanteau “academobilities” to assist scholar’s critical awareness of their power and privilege. Such an approach has much to offer those in interdisciplinary fields navigate the authority present in institutional education.

As with the self-reflexive nature that Brown’s article illustrates, we hope that this special issue paves the way for continuous discussion among scholars and artists of where the turn lies within their own practice. As highlighted by these articles, most submissions gravitated toward just three or four turns. Was this preference emblematic of what Straw questioned as fashionability? In considering that topics and subjects change constantly and intermingle within communication and cultural studies, the articles of this issue illustrate how these turns are not isolated from each other but fall within the same circuits.

Returning to Straw’s insights means thinking about turns beyond aligning one’s research to a trend, but rather our need to be reflexive in the changing conditions of academic work. In some cases the historical context calls for a refiguration of scholarship, other times it is a reflection of the fashionability of particular disciplines, the influence of a recent translation, or the result of packaging an academic trend as a marketable series of book titles. What the turn calls into question then is the constellation of political, economic, and social pressures that shape what it means to identify as an academic today.

Reference

Bachman-Medick, Doris. 2016. *Cultural Turns: New Orientations in the Study of Culture*, translated from the German by Adam Blauhut. Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter.